DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 352 UD 032 567

AUTHOR	Carmona, Lisa A.; Wheelock, Anne; First, Joan
TITLE	A Gathering Storm: How Palm Beach County Schools Fail Poor and Minority Children.
INSTITUTION	National Coalition of Advocates for Students, Boston, MA.
PUB DATE	1998-05-00
NOTE	60p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 100 Boylston Street, Suite 737, Boston, MA 02116; toll-free telephone: 800-809-6227; e-mail: NCASMFE@aol.com; World Wide Web: http://www.ncas1.org ($14.95; $5 for Palm Beach County parents and community organizations).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Ability Grouping; Academic Achievement; *Disadvantaged Youth; Diversity (Student); *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; Minority Groups; *School Desegregation; State Legislation; Tables (Data); Track System (Education); *Urban Schools; Urban Youth
IDENTIFIERS	*Palm Beach County Schools FL

ABSTRACT

This report takes a hard look at the day-to-day workings of Palm Beach County (Florida) schools to explain why the systemic change model of Florida's current reform legislation is likely to fail the students in greatest need of improved schooling. The Palm Beach County School District is the 4th largest district in Florida, and the 15th largest in the nation. The students are highly diverse, with 52.5% White in 1997, 30.1% Black, and 14.81% Hispanic American. Data in this report show how different results in different schools are linked to the different conditions for learning in these schools. The report demonstrates that many school practices contribute to, rather than mitigate, the unequal economic and social conditions that characterize Palm Beach County. Although the schools are officially desegregated, many schools remain islands of racial isolation where low achievement is the norm, and the teacher turnover is very high in these schools. Ability grouping practices remain in place. The students who are most dependent on schooling are receiving the least effective schooling. Specific recommendations are made to improve achievement and equality in the Palm Beach County schools. An appendix discusses the rights of Limited English Proficient children, and a second appendix outlines the county school budget. (Contains 12 figures, 10 maps, and 6 tables.) (SLD)

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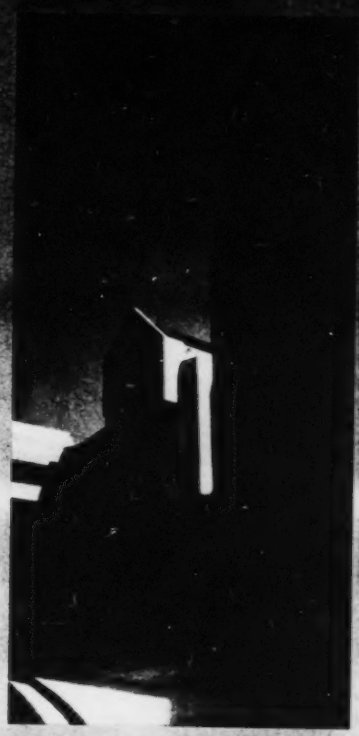

A Gathering Storm

How Palm Beach County Schools Fail Poor and Minority Children

A Report by the National Coalition of Advocates for Students

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Special Thanks to:

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for providing the financial support for this project; The Florida Department of Education for fulfilling NCAS's data requests; George Madaus for advice and support; Don Moore and Barbara Arguimedo for sharing many valuable lessons from Chicago school reform efforts and the advocacy experiences of Designs for Change; Echo Smith, Flory Barreto, and the West Palm Beach Office of Florida Legal Services, Inc. The opinions expressed in this report are those of NCAS and do not necessarily reflect those of funding sources. The authors assume full responsibility for any inaccuracies or errors that appear in the following pages.

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A Gathering Storm

How Palm Beach County Schools Fail Poor and Minority Children

A Report by the National Coalition of Advocates for Students

Palm Beach County Community Reporting Initiative

May 1998

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Foreword

These are giddy times for policymakers and politicians who seek reform of public schools. Finally, they believe, they have a fool-proof formula for improvement—not just in individual schools but across entire school districts. It's simple, they say: Start with "high standards" for what all students should "know and be able to do." Add "curriculum frameworks" based on these standards. Align assessments with the curriculum, then test students to determine how well they have mastered the standards. And finally, put schools and students alike on notice that they will be held accountable for results. Those who succeed will be rewarded. Those who fall short will be dealt consequences. Excellence for all is just a matter of applying the formula.

Since 1990, this strategy for systemic reform has become the new conventional wisdom, driving policies at the federal, state, and local levels. At the federal level, Goals 2000 and Title 1 legislation have mandated a flurry of activity in the states—Florida among them. This activity has produced the Sunshine State Standards, more testing, and the adoption of new accountability models, with failing schools put on the state's "List of Shame." And as districts set their sights on results as defined by school and student improvement on standardized test scores, increasing numbers are resorting to "tough, new" promotion and graduation policies in hopes of motivating students to work harder.

But rhetoric is not always reality. Outside the circles of politicians and bureaucrats, schools do not so easily conform to the model of change so rationally laid out by those in policymaking roles.

This report by the National Coalition of Advocates for Students takes a hard look at the day-to-day workings of Palm Beach County schools to explain why the "systemic change model" of Florida's current reform legislation is likely to fail. Indeed, this model is likely to fail most miserably for those students in greatest need of improved schooling.

According to the perspective of new reform policies, only "outcome data" count in assessing schools and students. But this report insists on the importance of paying attention to a different kind of evidence as well. The data revealed in these pages highlight how different results in different schools are linked to the different conditions for learning in those schools. Inside every classroom, a variety of

"normal" practices shape the day-to-day experiences of students to have a powerful effect on outcomes. These practices determine which students will succeed and which will fail.

Children in Palm Beach County do not begin school on a level playing field. Some are launched into their educational orbit with the momentum of their family's wealth and social status behind them. Others arrive in the elementary grades with less material support. They too have dreams for their future lives as citizens and workers, and their parents expect that their schools will provide them with an education equal to that of their more economically advantaged classmates.

What this report demonstrates, however, is that many school practices contribute to rather than mitigate the unequal economic and social conditions that characterize Palm Beach County. Although the district has officially desegregated, many children still attend segregated elementary and secondary classrooms. In some cases, entire schools remain islands of racial isolation where low achievement is the norm. In these schools, high teacher turnover and deteriorating facilities add to the overall climate of limited expectations.

Just as troubling, many county schools routinely engage in practices that demonstrably exclude students most in need of the best the district has to offer from settings where they can enjoy full participation in learning. New slogans to the contrary, century-old ability grouping practices remain firmly in place. Despite claims that "all children can learn," many schools still act as if only some, usually white, students can benefit from challenging curriculum assignments. Even "innovations" like magnet schools become new sorting devices that undermine rather than promote racial integration as intended.

Taken together, this collection of sorting practices works powerfully to divide students into "haves" and "have-nots," both across the district and within schools. Those who come to school with the greatest advantages stand the best chance of experiencing the most meaningful opportunities to learn. Those most dependent on enriched schooling receive the least. Over the years, these practices shut thousands of students off from rich opportunities to learn the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that will shape their futures as citizens and workers in the county.

In subtle and not-to-subtle ways, these practices communicate the message: "You do not really belong in the community's mainstream." The public should not be surprised, then, that many students will feel no sense of membership in their schools. As the least advantaged students realize that their schools have disproportionately allocated the resources they need for learning to "other" children, their motivation for learning understandably diminishes. As these students spend more and more time in a curriculum below their normal grade level, they must only conclude that their teachers do not really believe in their capacity to learn. And it should be no surprise that many parents lose faith in their schools as a means for helping their children realize their aspirations and withdraw from interacting with schools they do not perceive to be "theirs."

This report is not an easy read. It asks the reader to imagine schooling from the point of view of each school's most vulnerable students. It asks the community to consider what it must be like to spend day after day in schools that are overcrowded and alien, where adults who may have little appreciation for community and family traditions that are different from those of their students may resort to lowering expectations in lieu of creating a school culture of high expectations for all.

As painful as the evidence may be, all policymakers, teachers, administrators, and parents must read this report and pay attention to its recommendations. If those responsible for educating all students can face the problems of unequal opportunities revealed here, that in itself will be a step toward resolving these problems. If decision-makers and educators in Palm Beach County can agree that that every single student in every single school deserves the best schooling the county now offers only to some, common ground for discussion will be established.

Realizing the vision of schools where all students learn well requires every citizen of Palm Beach County to work without further delay to remedy the inequities this report documents. Until then, all the grandiose policy rhetoric in the world will mean little to the real lives of children and their families.

Anne Wheelock

Author, *Crossing the Tracks: How "Untracking" Can Save America's Schools*

Introduction

The National Coalition of Advocates for Students (NCAS) has prepared *A Gathering Storm: How Palm Beach County Schools Fail Poor and Minority Students* as a wake-up call for the families and sending communities of the Palm Beach County School District students, for business leaders, and for all concerned citizens. We hope that, in the hands of local parents and community leaders, this document will stimulate local dialogue and community action necessary to ensure long overdue reforms in the public schools of Palm Beach County.

We have been asked why a national organization would devote such extensive time and resources to a study of a single school district located so far from its headquarters. The answer is simple: NCAS and its member organizations work in most of the nation's largest cities to achieve remedies to public school equity failures. We have learned that public schools: commonly educate different groups of students for different futures; restrict the flow of information to communities about how different educational outcomes in different schools are linked to different conditions for learning in those schools; and routinely exclude low-income families and communities of color from meaningful participation in decisions about how individual children are educated and in debate about how schools must change.

NCAS chose to study the Palm Beach County School District because, even when viewed within the broad universe of communities and schools described above, the Palm Beach County School District stands out as a prime example of a school district that engages in:

- Persistent and pervasive tracking of children for instruction by race, home language, and economic class.
- Careful control of the flow of information to the public about the disastrous impact of these sorting practices upon the educational outcomes of affected students.
- Long-standing and widespread exclusion of low-income and minority parents from meaningful participation in the oversight and implementation of school improvement activities.

Additionally, NCAS studied the Palm Beach County School District because of the county's rapidly changing demographic makeup. In the future, the steadily growing numbers of Black, Latino, and Southeast Asian students who will attend the county's public schools will suffer from these practices if they are allowed to continue. We are also certain that the findings and recommendations that appear here will be of interest to other school districts with similar student populations.

A Gathering Storm is based on a year-long study conducted by a local attorney, Lisa Carmona of Florida Rural Legal Services, Inc. Ms. Carmona's painstaking analysis of a vast quantity of multi-year data, submitted by the Palm Beach County School District to the Florida Department of Education, provides ample evidence that the district offers both the best and the worst to its students—depending largely upon who they are and where they go to school.

Ms. Carmona uses carefully constructed comparisons of selected predominantly white and predominantly Black/Latino local schools to demonstrate that in Palm Beach County it is usually white students who get the best that the public schools have to offer, while racial and language minority students generally get the worst.

A team of NCAS staff and consultants developed the recommendations for change presented in this report. Taken together, these recommendations both frame a new vision of fairer schools for Palm Beach County students and provide a starting place for accomplishing that vision.

The title of this report—*A Gathering Storm: How Palm Beach County Public Schools Fail Poor and Minority Students*—alludes to the mounting evidence contained here and in reports prepared by CTAC and other consultants, as well as local media. Taken as a whole, this evidence supports the conclusion that much is awry in the Palm Beach County School District, and the district's efforts to correct these wrongs amount to far too little, far too late.

Joan M. First

Executive Director
National Coalition of Advocates for Students
Boston, MA

May 1, 1998

The Context for School Reform in the County

In 1991, the Florida Legislature initiated a series of changes in the state's public education system. The changes concentrated on the following areas: State Education Goals; School Improvement; Student Performance Standards and Assessment; Local Flexibility; Performance Indicators and Reporting; and Accountability for Results. As part of this effort, the state identified eight goals for success in Florida's schools:

- GOAL 1: Readiness to Start School
- GOAL 2: Graduation Rate and Readiness for Post-Secondary Employment
- GOAL 3: Student Performance
- GOAL 4: Learning Environment
- GOAL 5: School Safety and Environment
- GOAL 6: Teachers and Staff
- GOAL 7: Adult Literacy
- GOAL 8: Parental Involvement

Parent and community involvement in school-site decision-making is considered a cornerstone of reform in Florida. Thus, the state requires all schools to establish school advisory councils. The School Advisory Council is charged with assisting in developing an annual school improvement plan that must set forth the school's position with respect to the state's education goals, and with focusing on improving student achievement at the school. In this context, Palm Beach County schools are required to have an approved school improvement plan for every school in the district.

In addition to the school improvement plan, each school is required to prepare and distribute an annual School Public Accountability Report to parents and members of the community. The report is a summary of the school's progress in achieving the state's eight education goals, as well as progress on the school improvement plan and financial information. Although this report summarizes key information, the School Advisory Council Report provides more detailed information about the school.

Under Florida law, the state must provide assistance and require accountability from schools that fail to make adequate progress.

A school may fail to make adequate progress by reporting that it has not made adequate progress according to the goals set forth in its school improvement plan. Additionally, the Department of Education may issue a determination that a school has failed to make adequate progress if students fail to meet state criteria over a two-year period in reading, writing, and mathematics. These schools are entitled to greater assistance from the Department of Education, as well as their own school board.

Florida has set standards for student performance in seven subject areas: language arts, mathematics, science, the arts, social studies, health and physical education, and foreign languages. The standards, also known as the Sunshine State Standards, set the benchmarks for student performance in each of these areas. The state requires that student progress be assessed through a Statewide Assessment Program that includes the following assessments:

A. The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) required for students in grades 4, 5, 8, and 10.

B. The Florida Writes! Test is required of students in grades 4, 8, and 10.

C. The High School Competency Test (HSCT) is required for students in grade 11. Students must pass this exam in order to graduate from high school with a standard diploma.

D. Additionally, districts are required to administer nationally normed achievement tests in grades 4 and 8. The Palm Beach County School District uses the CTBS exam for this purpose.

Beginning in the spring of 1998, the FCAT test results will be used for accountability purposes.

In 1997, the Legislature set forth new requirements supporting higher student standards. These include the following: Algebra I or an equivalent course as a requirement for high school graduation; higher standards for the high school grading scale; a minimum 2.0 grade point average in courses needed for high school graduation; student progression from one grade to the next must be determined by proficiency in reading, writing and mathematics; students not meeting reading performance levels in the first, second and third grades must be provided intensive reading instruction and may be retained if they have not met expectations by the end of grade 2 or 3.

Schools that excel through higher performance or exemplary improvement will be rewarded through the Florida School Recognition Program. This program will measure a school's achievement over a two-year period in areas such as: school climate; innovation in teaching and learning; success of School Improvement Plans; and parent, community and student involvement in learning. The state will provide financial awards to faculty and staff at these schools. These funds may be used for performance bonuses for faculty and staff or to support the school improvement efforts.

Schools performing below expected standards are entitled to assistance from the school district for the first three years. The State Department of Education may offer assistance to such schools by facilitating improvement activities, disseminating information about successful programs and providing other guidance.

The responsibility for ensuring that schools and students meet expected levels of performance belongs to the district and to individual schools. However, the State Board of Education may intervene in order to protect the rights of students in low-performing schools by recommending that school boards take action to ensure that students in such schools receive adequate services. Thus, the state may require the district to:

a. Provide additional resources or assistance if the cause of the school's failure to make progress is related to district policy or practice.

b. Initiate a plan to resolve the education equity problems at the school.

c. Contract for the educational services of the school, or reorganize the school under a new principal and possibly new staff.

d. Allow students to attend other schools of their choice within the district.

In the event that a school district fails to comply with the ordered action to improve a low performing school, the State Department of Education may withhold the transfer of state funds to the school district.

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The Palm Beach County School District

The Demographics

The Palm Beach County School District is the fourth largest school district in the state of Florida and the fifteenth largest in the nation. The School District covers the entire County of Palm Beach. The 1990 Census data estimated the county's total population at 863,518. The Bureau of Economic and Business Research of the University of Florida estimated that by 1996 the population increased to 988,328.

Along with the increase in overall county population has come an increase in the number of students enrolled in county schools. According to the district's records, the number of students attending Palm Beach County's public schools has grown steadily over the past four years, increasing by approximately 4,500 students each year. During the 1996–97 school year, 131 public schools served 134,294 students.

According to the district's records, the school population is also becoming more diverse. During the 1993–94 school year, approximately 120,000 students were enrolled in Palm Beach County's K–12 schools. Over 64,000 students were enrolled at the elementary school level. Of these students, 56 percent were white; 29.4 percent were Black; and 12.6 percent were Hispanic. By the 1996–97 school year, enrollment at the elementary school level had increased to over 68,000. The percentage of white students decreased to 52.5 percent, while enrollment of Black and Hispanic students increased to 30.1 percent and 14.81 percent respectively. Similar enrollment trends were also documented at the middle and high school levels.[1]

1. This report analyzes data for white, black, and Hispanic students as reported by the Florida Department of Education. The Florida Department of Education did not report data for Haitian, Jamaican, or African American students separately.

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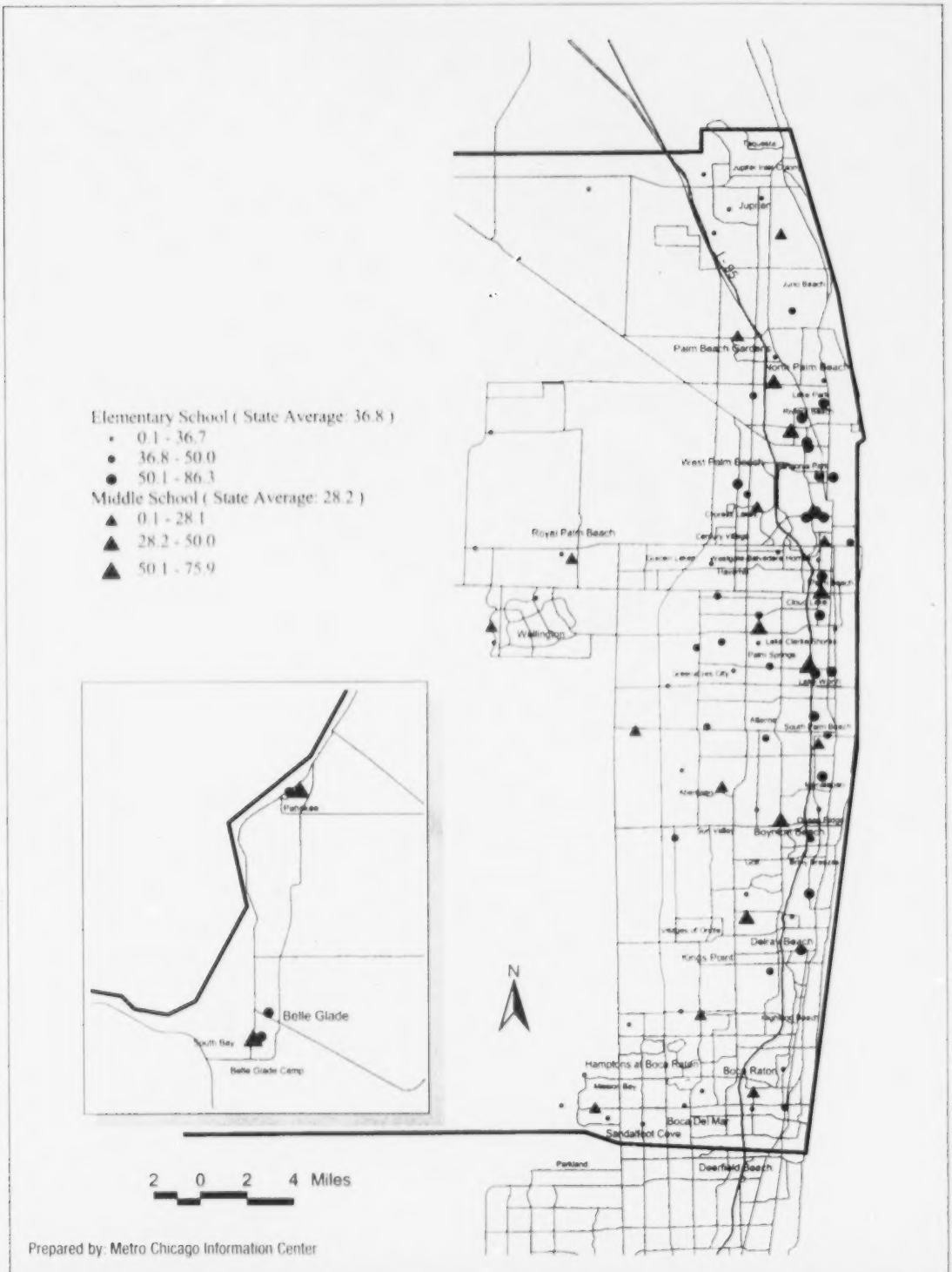

MAP 1 Elementary and Middle School Students Eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch, 1996–97

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Palm Beach County Schools also serve a large number of Limited English Proficient (LEP) children. During the 1996–97 school year, the district reported a total enrollment of approximately 16,500 LEP students. At the elementary school level, 13.0 percent of all students were classified as LEP. At the middle and high school levels the percentage of LEP students decreased to 8.1 percent and 9.6 percent respectively.

Students with disabilities represented 13.7 percent of the elementary school population; 14.8 percent of the middle school students and 9.0 percent of high schools students during the 1996–97 school year. Overall, 54 percent of the students who participated in the Exceptional Student Education (ESE) program (including gifted) were white; 29.5 percent were black, and 14 percent were Hispanic. The rates of participation in ESE programs varied. For example, black students comprised 61 percent of the students enrolled in the "educable mentally handicapped" program; white students represented 28 percent and Hispanics represented 11 percent of total program enrollment. In contrast, white students represented 54 percent of the students enrolled in the Specific Learning Disabled program (SLD). Black students participated in the SLD program at a rate of 30 percent and Hispanics at a rate of 15 percent. The gifted program contained the largest number of white students enrolled in ESE, with 5,163 (81 percent) students enrolled during 1996–97. The total number of black students enrolled in the gifted program was 396 (6 percent), and there were 430 (7 percent) Hispanic students enrolled in the gifted program.

Student enrollment in Palm Beach County Schools reflects the wide economic contrasts in the community as a whole. One of the indicators most commonly used to determine the socioeconomic status of a student population is the number of students who receive free or reduced-price lunch services. Students whose family income is at or below 130 percent of poverty level qualify for free lunch.

Those whose family income ranges within 131–185 percent of poverty level qualify for reduced-price lunch. By this measure, somewhere between one-third and one-half of the district's elementary students experience poverty or near poverty. During 1993–94, 44 percent of the District's elementary school students received free or reduced-price lunch services. In 1996–97 the number of elementary school students who received free or reduced-price lunch services decreased to 37 percent (see Map 1).

Administration and Instructional Personnel

During the 1996–97 school year, The district employed over 15,000 persons, with administrators and instructional staff (teachers and classroom paraprofessionals) playing a key role in the district's operation. However, employment patterns do not match student enrollment. During the 1996–97 school year, 83 percent of the district level administrative staff were white; 11 percent were black, and 4.5 percent were Hispanic. Minorities were also underrepresented in instructional staff. During the same year, approximately 80 percent of instructional staff at all school levels were white, 15 percent were black, and only 4 percent were Hispanic.

To its credit, Palm Beach County's schools have made attempts to diversify its teaching staff. The District has implemented an affirmative action policy and has established standardized guidelines for hiring applicants for instructional positions. District documents indicate that Palm Beach County Schools have pursued a number of recruitment initiatives to help attract qualified minority candidates for employment. These include spring recruitment trips to Florida universities and participation in conferences with large minority enrollments, as well as mailing instructional application packets to universities with large minority enrollments throughout the eastern and southeastern areas of the nation. Hiring of individuals for administrative positions is based on a different process that requires the school board's approval at the time a position is created. Additionally, once a candidate successfully completes the interview process, he or she must be recommended by the superintendent for final approval by the school board.

Despite good intentions, these efforts have produced little gain, and limited numbers of black and Hispanic teachers in Palm Beach County Schools remain a particular barrier to the success of minority students. Experts believe that the presence of diversity among school staff is important to all children. Such teachers and other school staff

provide crucially important role models to students because they promote a greater awareness and understanding of people who come from different backgrounds. Moreover, a diverse school staff plays an important role in ensuring that alternative views are heard and carefully considered as decisions are made that affect individual minority students.[2]

School Desegregation and Students' Access to Educational Opportunity

The Palm Beach County School system was officially desegregated in August of 1971 after a 16-year court battle under *Holland v. the Board of Public Instruction of Palm Beach County, Florida*. As a result of that case, the district is required to meet goals for racial balance within the schools. This requirement affects school site selection, bussing, and allocation of resources among schools.

Although the court abolished the dual school system, racial tension as well as allegations of inequities within the system continued to plague the district. In 1987 and 1988 complaints alleging disparate treatment of black students, teachers, and administrators were filed with the United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (OCR). These complaints triggered a broad investigation, and ultimately OCR issued a report that detailed findings of serious civil rights violations within the district.

The Office for Civil Rights found that throughout the 17 years following the resolution of the original desegregation case, the Palm Beach County School Board had continued to engage in a pattern of actions that directly contributed to the racial identifiability of certain schools, the *resegregation* of the system as a whole, and disparate treatment of black students on the basis of their race. OCR found that the district had ignored racial balance guidelines that set a 60 percent maximum enrollment of black students in individual schools. Furthermore, OCR also found that the District bussed a disproportionate number of black students to predominantly white schools in order to achieve racial balance, whereas students from predominantly white neighborhoods were generally permitted to attend their neighborhood schools.[3] In a 1991 study, a leading researcher from the University of Chicago commented in response to these findings: *the basic problem of resegregation was not white flight from county schools but expanding residential segregation and the failure of the school board to make reassignments to offset those trends.*[4]

In addition to the serious findings made by OCR regarding the district's student enrollment patterns, important findings were also made with respect to the district's employment practices. OCR investigators found that in spite of written personnel procedures and affirmative action goals, the district's teacher assignment practices contributed to a district-wide pattern of segregation. Additionally, OCR found violations with respect to the district's hiring practices of black administrators.

In response to the OCR findings, the district prepared a Corrective Action Plan. The plan proposed the following : 1) Implementation of magnet programs; 2) Location of new schools in a "neutral zone"; 3) A commitment from the school board to work with developers and governmental leaders to establish affordable housing in areas that would integrate neighborhoods; 4) Alignment of school attendance boundaries in order to achieve racial balance by the 1991–92 school year; 5) Implementation of a new system for teacher hiring and in-service training for individuals who had authority to recommend administrative appointments.

The district's success in achieving the goals set forth in its corrective action plan has been limited. The implementation of magnet schools, which were the cornerstone for the corrective action plan, will be discussed in a later portion of this document. However, as mentioned previously in this report, minorities continue to be underrepresented in the

2. "The Limited Presence of African-American Teachers," *Review of Educational Research*, Sabrina Hope King, Vol. 63, No. 2, pp. 115–149, Summer 1993.

3. The overall impact of these policies was reflected in the disparate treatment to which students at Suncoast High School and Kennedy Middle School were subjected. Students at these schools received lower scores on standardized tests, they were offered fewer academic courses and substantially fewer advanced courses, the laboratory facilities and media center were inadequate and the number of teachers with advanced degrees was significantly lower at these schools. In response to these specific school findings, the district implemented magnet programs at both these schools.

4. "Building and Integrated Community, Racial Trends and Community Choices in Palm Beach County," Final Report to Project Mosaic, Gary Orfield, University of Chicago, 1991.

district's teaching force and many black students remain isolated in racially identifiable schools.

During the summer of 1997, NCAS filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights' regional office in Atlanta, Georgia. NCAS requested copies of all complaints filed with OCR against the Palm Beach County School District from 1988 through the summer of 1997. The purpose of this request was to determine if the district had remedied prior problems and identify patterns of dissatisfaction with the school system that might have persisted.

In response to this request, OCR produced information on 71 complaints. Of these, 38 complaints focused on placement or provision of services to exceptional students; 19 were filed by district employees' alleging that the district's employment practices violated their civil rights; three alleged discriminatory practices in recruitment and enrollment of children in the district's gifted program; and one complaint alleged discrimination in recruitment and retention of students in the High School of the Arts on the basis of race. The remaining complaints were referred for follow-up through OCR's monitoring of the desegregation complaint.

In cases involving employment matters, the complaints were forwarded to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission for investigation. For this reason, NCAS examined most closely those complaints related to the provision of equal educational opportunity. By federal law, all public schools in the nation must provide children with disabilities a free and appropriate education. This must also be accomplished in the least restrictive environment. A large number of complaints filed with OCR involved the provision of services or placement decisions for students with disabilities. Although, in most cases, parents withdrew their complaints after negotiating a resolution with the district, the complaints consistently conveyed the families' lack of connection with the school district and their frustration with the intricate tangle of bureaucratic red tape they had to unravel in order to protect their children's rights.

In addition to compliance with monitoring and reporting requirements of the federal government, the district is also required to report a vast array of data to the Florida Department of Education. The state monitors the district's progress in a number of areas, including the provision of services to limited English proficient students. All public schools in the state of Florida are subject to a federal consent decree that requires them to provide adequate, comprehensible instruction to limited English proficient students. In essence, all public schools in Florida are required to provide limited English proficient students access to comprehensible instruction and to all school programs regardless of the child's level of proficiency in the English language.

In 1992, a complaint was filed against the district due to the failure of Palm Beach County's schools to address the needs of its large limited English proficient student population. The complaint led to a districtwide investigation of the district's provision of services to its limited English proficient students. As a result, the district revamped its English for Speakers of Other Languages program (ESOL) in an attempt to ensure that all schools had the tools needed to teach this growing segment of the district's student population.

Nonetheless, compliance with the federal requirements has been less than perfect. After the 1992 complaint, there were several other complaints filed with the Florida Department of Education regarding deficiencies in the provision of services to the district's limited English proficient students. These included a complaint about the segregation of limited English proficient students at Boca High School. Although, overall compliance may have increased, parents of limited English proficient students continue to encounter problems at their local schools, and participation of limited English proficient students in special programs, especially the gifted program, is limited.

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Differences in the Quality of Services Delivered by Schools

Legally, all children are entitled to a free and appropriate education. In a democratic society, we also assume that all children within a specific school system will receive comparable educational services. Unfortunately, this is not always the case in Palm Beach County. The data available to us make it clear that African American and Latino students in Palm Beach County Schools do not have opportunities to learn that equal those of white students. For example:

- Minority students are dramatically underrepresented in classes and programs characterized by high expectations and designed to prepare students for post-secondary educational opportunities.
- Minority students are disproportionately suspended from school, resulting in significant time lost to learning.
- Minority students are dramatically overrepresented in schools determined to be "low-performing" under the state's education reform law.
- Minority students are disproportionately represented in the numbers of students who drop out of Palm Beach County's schools every year.

The patterns documented here suggest that a variety of school practices are at work to sort students into "haves" and "have-nots"—into those who have access to valued learning and those who are excluded from that learning. These practices include ability grouping and tracking in whole courses of study and in magnet programs, and exclusion from school through suspension. These practices overall deny black and Hispanic students in the district equal access to meaningful educational opportunities.

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Ability Grouping and Tracking

Ability grouping is the practice of sorting students into different levels, kinds of classes, or programs according to students' perceived abilities, as measured by test scores or subjective assessment by teachers. Ability grouping occurs as early as kindergarten and the elementary grades, and continues through middle and high school. At the high school level, ability grouping that may seem benign in the earlier grades rigidifies as educators divide students into courses of study for high-, average-, or low-scoring students. Students on the "high track" are enrolled in a series of courses that prepare them for college. Middle- and low-scoring students more often enter general and vocational courses that organize their curriculum on the assumption that students lack the ability to succeed in post-secondary education.

Leading researchers on tracking and ability grouping have found no evidence that these practices result in more productive learning environments. In fact, students placed in low-ability groups at the elementary school level typically receive a watered-down curriculum and slower-paced instruction compared to their peers in the "top" groups. As a result, they fall further and further behind so that their placement in low-level classes at the high school level is virtually ensured. Locked into settings characterized by low expectations and limited opportunities to learn, they all too often do not receive an education that develops the knowledge, talents, and skills needed to enter post-secondary education.[5]

In contrast, students who have the greatest advantages out of school are also the most likely to receive an enriched curriculum in supportive classrooms. In Palm Beach County, an array of special programs is available for children who are identified as "most likely to succeed." A child's access to special programs—including classes for students defined as "gifted;" magnet programs; and honors, advanced placement, or higher level courses at the middle school and high school levels—can play a determinative role in his or her opportunities to learn and to succeed in college. An analysis of the racial and ethnic composition of the students that had access to these programs revealed shocking patterns of inequity within the system.

PHOTO © THE PALM BEACH POST/ALLEN EYESTONE

The Gifted Program

Palm Beach County's "gifted" program is designed for students who are perceived as being capable of superior intellectual development and high performance. Students are eligible for gifted program services from kindergarten through grade 12. Referrals for screening for eligibility for the gifted program can come from parents, school personnel, or community professionals. A Child Study Team processes these referrals and determines when it is appropriate to proceed with screening. The screening process involves administration of tests, as well as a determination that the child has a demonstrated ability in certain areas such as leadership, motivation, academic performance, and creativity. The process is lengthy, and in some cases it may be months before testing on an individual child may be completed.

5 "Keeping Track, Part 1: The Policy and Practice of Curriculum Inequality," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Jeannie Oakes, September 1986.

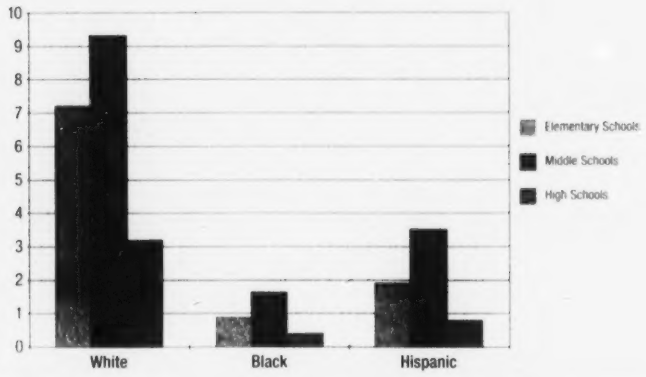


FIGURE 1 Percentage of Students in Gifted Programs, 1995–96

According to a 1996 report prepared by the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability for the Florida Legislature, 20 percent of the gifted program evaluations performed during the 1994–95 school year in Palm Beach County were prepared by independent evaluators. The clear implication of this finding is that parents who have the financial resources or other means to have their children tested privately are able to speed up the process in order to ensure their children's admission to the gifted program. Recently, an independent consultant hired by the district recommended that private testing be discontinued.

Throughout the years, the gifted program has been subject to criticism on the grounds that the program enrolls disproportionately few low-income and minority children. The district's 1995 Exceptional Student Education Handbook sets forth a plan to increase the numbers of underrepresented students in the gifted programs. The district identified "underrepresented groups" as, "Non Caucasian" students, students from low socioeconomic status families, and limited English proficient students. Similar plans have been implemented in 49 other school districts throughout the State of Florida. The Palm Beach County School District's stated long-term five-year goal was to bring 2 to 3 percent of these underrepresented groups into the gifted program.

The district's success in the implementation of the plan to reach even this limited goal is questionable. Figure 1 demonstrates the level of participation by minority students in the gifted program during the 1995–96 school year.

Data for the 1995–96 school year indicate that there were 3,150 elementary school students enrolled in gifted programs throughout the district. Of these students, 2,628 were white, representing 83.4 percent of all students enrolled in the gifted program. The remaining 522 (16.6 percent) were minorities. In short, the percentage of minority students enrolled in gifted classrooms represents about only one third of their expected enrollment considering their numbers in the district overall. Unfortunately, the 1996–97 school report data did not provide a racial breakdown of gifted program participants.

Data for the 1995–96 school year were available by race. These data led to significant findings in terms of the racial make-up of the "gifted student" population. During the 1995–96 school year, the district had an average of 4.7 percent of its elementary school students enrolled in the gifted program, but 7.2 percent of all white elementary school students were identified as gifted. Minority participation in contrast, totaled 0.9 percent of all black students and 1.9 percent of all Hispanic students. In conclusion, white students' chances of enrolling in the district's elementary grades gifted program are 1 out of 14; those of black students are 1 in 100; and those of Hispanic students are about 1 in 50. Put another way, given their comparative numbers in the overall elementary enrollment, white students are seven times more likely as black students and almost four times more likely than Hispanic students to participate in gifted classes. In short, the percentage of minority students enrolled in gifted classrooms represents only one-third of their expected enrollment considering their numbers in the district overall.

Minority student participation in the gifted program increased slightly at the middle school level. During 1995–96, 9.3 percent of the district's white middle school students were enrolled in gifted programs. The rate of participation for minority students increased to 1.6 percent for black students and 3.5 percent for Hispanic students. Still, given their overall enrollments, white students were almost six times more likely than black students and about two and one-half times more likely than Hispanic students to participate in gifted programs in the middle grades.

Opportunities for enrolling in gifted classes dropped once again for minority students once they reached high school. At the high school level, the participation rate for white students was 3.2 percent. However, black and Hispanic students only represented 0.4 percent and 0.8 percent of students enrolled in the program. These numbers appear to be particularly stark considering that during the 1995–96 school year 27.4 percent of the total high school students were black and 12.7 percent of the total high school students were Hispanic, while 57.4 percent were white.

Clearly, regardless of the grade level, black and Hispanic students do not have equitable access to gifted programs in Palm Beach County Schools. An analysis of the location of "gifted programs" in Palm Beach County Schools suggests one explanation for the low enrollment of black and Hispanic students in these programs across the district. Map 2 presents the distribution of gifted programs throughout the district.

As shown, over 3,000 elementary school students identified as gifted are served at 22 of the District's 83 elementary schools. Twelve of these schools have a greater than 10 percent enrollment of gifted students, more than twice the percentage of the 4.7 elementary enrollment rate.

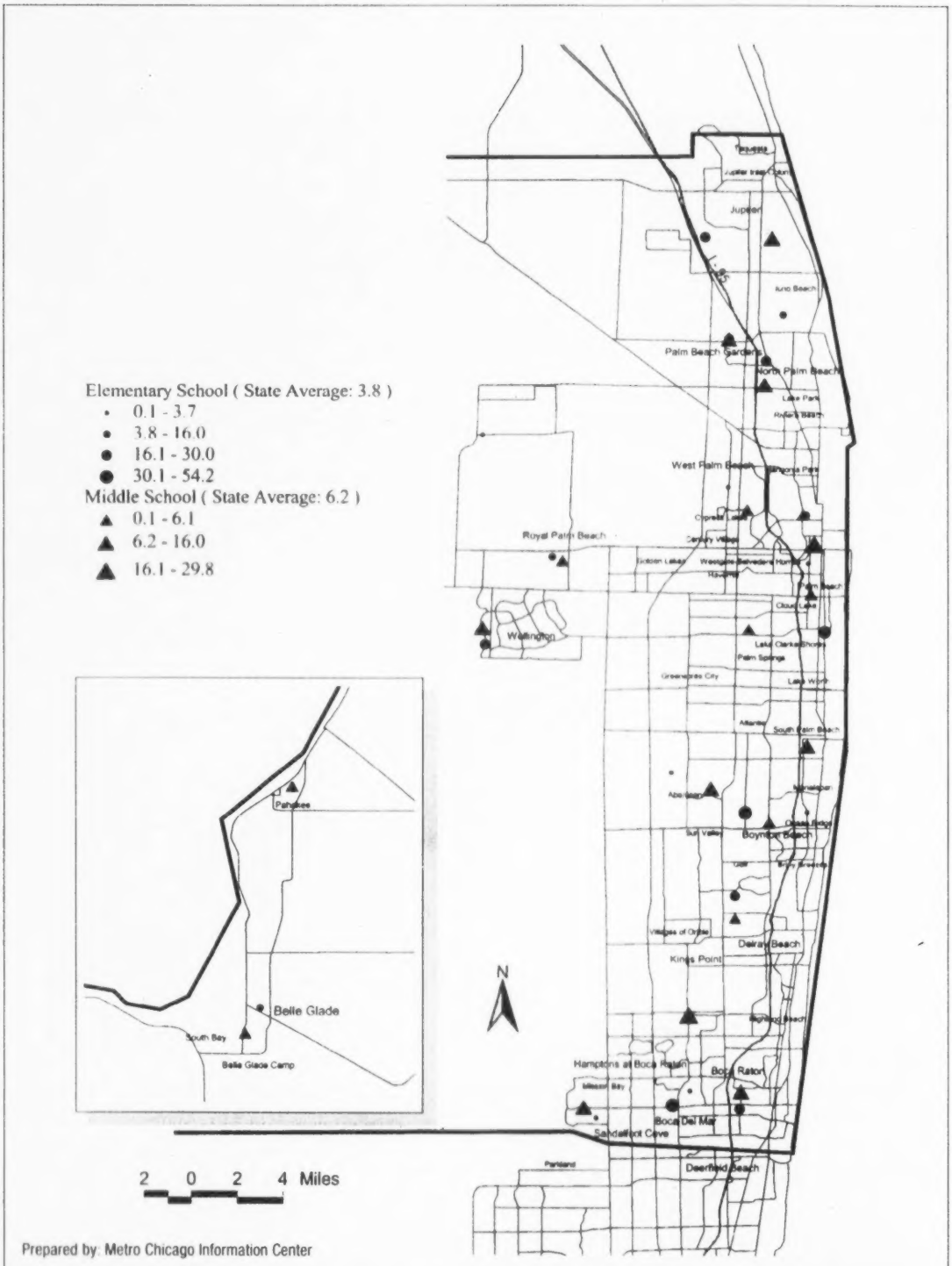
At some white, middle and upper income schools in particular, the total number of "gifted" students is disproportionately high. For example, at Del Prado Elementary in Boca Raton, where the population is approximately 80 percent white, 54.2 percent of the students participated in the gifted program. At Lighthouse Elementary in Jupiter, where 91.7 percent of the students are white, 29.2 percent of the school's students were identified as gifted. The number of poor students at both schools was also very low: Both schools had less than 10 percent total student enrollment in the free/reduced-price lunch program.

In contrast, at Belle Glade Elementary, where 69.1 percent of the student population is black and 28.4 percent is Hispanic, the rate of participation in the gifted program was only 4.1 percent.

The virtual absence of black and Hispanic students in this program leads to the obvious question of whether or not the program exists at the expense of minority students.

In many districts committed to desegregating schools, gifted programs are often located first and foremost in schools that enroll the highest percentages of black and Hispanic students. However, in Palm Beach County, comparatively few seats in "gifted" classrooms are available in the poorest and most racially isolated schools. However, a focus on the location of programs alone begs the question of how rich resources and high expectations are allocated to different groups of students and the beliefs that drive this allocation. The disproportionately high enrollment of white students in these programs across the district suggests that they work to protect segregated classrooms in individual schools, even in the face of the district's stated commitment to desegregation. As important, limited access of black and Hispanic students to gifted classrooms signals that minority students in Palm Beach County may not have equal access to the educational opportunities offered in those classes.

Clearly, all students can benefit from the opportunities to learn afforded by the "gifted" program. However, the persistence of separate classrooms for students labeled "gifted" sends the message that only a few, disproportionately white, students can benefit from enriched learning. Moreover, by setting up a hierarchy of expectations for the learning capacity of some students, "gifted" programs inadvertently contribute to the lowering of expectations for the district's remaining students. As a result, differences that students naturally bring to schools are reinforced. Moreover, initial gaps in achievement only widen over time as those students receiving the advantages of enriched schooling in their early years move "further" "faster" in relation to their classmates. Such practice is incompatible with the commitment to high standards for all students embodied in the state's education reform legislation.



MAP 2 Participation in Gifted Program, 1996–97

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Magnet Programs

In the early 1990s, the district created a number of magnet programs in response to the increased "resegregation" of schools throughout the county. A number of schools with low performance indicators and high minority enrollment figures were refurbished with new technology and equipment in hopes of attracting non-minority students back into these schools. The availability of federal funds to implement magnet programs made such schools an attractive tool for the district in its ongoing effort to achieve desegregation. Additionally, the state-of-the-art facilities and the availability of specialized programs have made these schools very appealing to white middle-class parents who might not otherwise enroll their children in schools that are located in minority and low-income areas.

The District Manual of Procedures for Magnet Schools and Programs enumerates three goals for these schools and programs: to promote and maintain diversity; to promote a unique or specialized curriculum approach; to improve achievement for all students participating in the magnet school or program.

As part of the district's commitment to promote diversity, it has developed a written policy designed to attract students from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds into the magnets, including Exceptional Education students, and limited English proficient students.

Academic or "related criteria" (such as test scores and teacher recommendations) may be used for determining eligibility for middle and high school students requesting admission into magnet schools or programs. If there are more applications than seats available for a specific school or program, the district uses a random selection process to select

students of all races and ethnicities, and both genders.

The district has charged the Office for Equity in Education with the responsibility for maintaining and disseminating information about magnet schools and programs throughout the county. However, success in achieving diversity in magnet school enrollment is limited. The district appears satisfied with the notion of attracting a sufficient number of white students to promote racial balance at these schools, and little effort has been made to promote true "diversity" within the magnet programs and magnet schools.

During the 1996–97 school year, there were nine elementary magnet schools across the district. Additionally, there were three middle schools and twelve high schools with magnet programs.

A total of 19,911 (14.8 percent of all students in the district) students participated in magnet programs throughout the district. Elementary and middle school magnet programs have been implemented on a schoolwide basis. However, with the exception of the School of the Arts, high schools do not offer schoolwide magnet programs.

A careful look at enrollment in high school magnet programs reveals that only a handful of programs approach meeting the goals of racially integrating student enrollment for equal access to learning opportunities. The Criminal Justice and the Medicine and Allied Health magnets at Lake Worth High School realize the goals of the magnet program most closely. In addition, enrollment data for the Aerospace Science program at Lake Worth, the Center for Pre-Law Related Careers at Palm Beach Lakes High, and the International Baccalaureate at Suncoast High suggest that these magnets operate with some spirit of offering equal access to knowledge in an integrated program.

However, in many high schools, minority students are often under-represented in the in-school magnet programs. For example:

- At the newly opened School of the Arts, only 24 percent of the students enrolled are black or Hispanic compared to their 44 percent average district enrollment.[6]
- At Suncoast High, where black students represent 39 percent of the school's overall enrollment, only 5 percent of students enrolled in the computer science magnet, and only 9 percent of students enrolled in the math, science, and engineering magnet are black.
- At Palm Beach Gardens High School, 34 percent of all students are black. However, only 12 percent of all students enrolled in the sports management magnet, 10 percent of those enrolled in the global business and entrepreneurship magnet, 9 percent of those enrolled in premedicine, and 7 percent of those enrolled in the television production magnet are black.
- At W. T. Dwyer High, 29 percent of the students are black, but only 12 percent of students enrolled in the school's magnet finance academy are black.

Table 1, provided to NCAS by the district, provides a breakdown of student participation of white, black, and Hispanic students in high school magnet programs by percentage as compared to overall school enrollment and district average enrollment.

6. This figure appears to be particularly low in light of the fact that participation of African American students at the School of the Arts was the subject of a complaint filed with the US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights in 1994. As a result, the district was required to engage in a series of activities designed to attract African American students to the School of the Arts.

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TABLE 1 Magnet Program Participation 1997–98

	WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC
DISTRICT AVERAGE	**53**	**29**	**15**
AW Dreyfoos School of the Arts	**73**	**16**	**8**
Atlantic High School	**53**	**30**	**11**
International Baccalaureate	66	6	8
Forest Hill High	**40**	**23**	**35**
Engineering and Technology	54	12	27
Environmental Science & Technology	83	5	9
Glades Central High	**2**	**77**	**20**
Criminal Justice	4	71	25
John I Leonard	**52**	**21**	**24**
Computer Technology	71	6	17
Jupiter High	**90**	**5**	**4**
Environmental Science & Technology	93	1	3
Lake Worth High	**42**	**34**	**21**
Medicine & Allied Health	53	27	16
Aerospace Science	57	24	18
Criminal Justice	47	35	17
Pahokee Middle/Sr. High	**7**	**73**	**19**
Aerospace Science	15	64	20
Medicine & Allied Health	9	78	14
Palm Beach Gardens High	**54**	**34**	**7**
Sports Management & Recreation	82	12	5
Global Business & Entrepreneurship	81	10	5
Pre-Medicine	74	9	5
Television & Film Production Technology	79	7	10
Travel & Tourism Management	63	22	3
Palm Beach Lakes High	**29**	**57**	**12**
Center for Pre-Law Related Careers	34	44	13
Teacher Academy	47	41	7
Suncoast High	**46**	**39**	**8**
International Baccalaureate	55	28	7
Interdisciplinary Program	33	55	8
Mathematics, Science & Engineering	63	9	9
Computer Science	84	5	12
WT Dwyer High	**66**	**29**	**3**
Finance Academy	82	12	4

* Source: Palm Beach County School District

In theory, Palm Beach County Schools' magnet programs could play a key role in ensuring equal opportunity to learn valued knowledge and skills in racially integrated settings. Organized around a variety of interests and orientations, these programs may have the potential to offer students choices among equally high-quality, multi-racial alternatives. However, in practice, the magnet programs have resegregated schools from within, separating groups of students into segregated settings within the high schools and excluding black, and in some cases, Hispanic students from classrooms where they will learn alongside their white peers.

The failure of many high school magnet programs to operate as anticipated by the desegregation plan may reflect a conceptual design flaw as well as an operational flaw. On one hand, a selection of programs may appear to offer enough choices to meet the needs of a variety of students. On the other hand, schools with a number of separate programs—even those that meet desegregation guidelines—run the risk of becoming "Christmas Tree Schools," adorned with appealing ornaments but lacking a core school purpose, focused instructional goals, and common expectations for student achievement.[7]

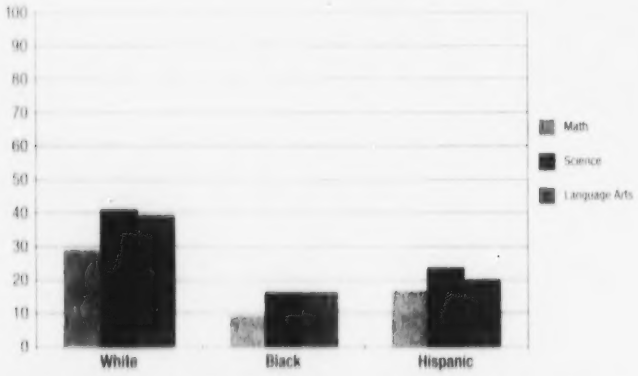

FIGURE 2 Percentage of Students Completing Level 3 Courses in High Schools, 1995–96

Such schools require special assistance for restructuring to ensure that every student has access to a grade-level curriculum and support to succeed in that curriculum.

Advanced Placement, Honors, and Higher-Level Courses

The establishment of high school Honors or Advanced Placement courses is often another means of tracking students who are perceived as "college bound." These courses provide a more intensive approach to certain subject areas and, in some cases, may lead to a student being able to receive college credit prior to entering college. According to the district's pupil progression plan, grades earned in Honors and Advanced Placement courses are also given more weight in calculating a student's GPA. Participation in these courses is determined by a student's performance in required courses as well as teacher recommendation.

Once again, these programs appear to be serving a predominantly white student population. The number of white students enrolled in and successfully completing upper-level courses and Advanced Placement courses is dramatically higher than the number of minorities. For example, during the 1995–96 school year, 1,618 students in the district passed Advanced Placement courses. Of these students, 1,140 (70.5 percent) were identified as white. At the same time, 142 (8.8 percent) students were identified as black, and 243 (15.0 percent) were identified as Hispanic.[8]

Figure 2 illustrates overall participation by race in upper-level courses in math, science, and language arts during the 1995–96 school year.

7 For an elaboration of the concept of "Christmas Tree Schools," see A.S. Bryk and others, *A view from the elementary schools: The state of reform in Chicago*, Chicago, Consortium on School Research, 1993.

8 Although the district reports participation by Asian and Indian students, we have chosen not to report this data as they represent less than 3 percent of the total high school population.

When we look at individual schools the numbers are even more disturbing. For example, there were 291 black students enrolled at Olympic Heights High School during the 1995–96 school year. However, only 2 (0.9 percent) students completed the upper-level math courses. In contrast, the rate of completion by white students averaged 17.4 percent. At Forest Hill High, only 18 (3.4 percent) black students completed upper-level science classes despite the fact that black students comprised 27.4 percent of the school's students.

These numbers raise serious concerns about the effects of student tracking and ability grouping practices implemented by the public schools in Palm Beach County. Research on ability grouping indicates that sorting practices result in those students who come to schools with significant advantages experience the most advantageous schooling, while students with the greatest needs experience limited opportunity to advance their learning. These differential experiences contribute to the widening of learning gaps and ultimately depress the achievement and aspirations of the minority, poor, non-English speaking, and students with disabilities. Because these students are also subject to lower expectations and are perceived as "less able," they are often relegated to lower-level courses that perpetuate their pattern of low achievement. These patterns appear to apply to Palm Beach County schools where large numbers of black, Hispanic, limited English proficient, and special needs students simply do not have equal access to the most meaningful learning opportunities that the district offers.

Exclusion from opportunities to learn challenging content is both harmful and unnecessary. The lack of access to such courses clearly limits students' future achievement in post-secondary education. Moreover, in high schools everywhere, underrepresented students have succeeded in high-level courses when they receive high-quality instruction and extra support in a climate of high expectations.[9] Models exist for change if Palm Beach County Schools can find the will to use them.

Discipline and Codes of Conduct

Palm Beach County Schools have a uniform comprehensive code of conduct that addresses a variety of issues including gang participation and drug activity. Additionally, schools have the ability to modify or expand upon some of these rules by implementing school-based rules such as dress codes. A complete set of school rules must be presented to each student at the beginning of each school year. This is usually done via a student handbook. NCAS requested copies of student handbooks and codes of conduct for all of the district's schools. Surprisingly, these handbooks revealed major differences in the content and manner in which students were notified of the behavior that was expected of them. While most schools had relatively inexpensive booklets printed which contained information about virtually every aspect of the school, other schools distributed very attractive, glossy folders that merely repeated the district's code of conduct.

A review of in-school and out-of-school suspension rates for all schools in the district from 1993–94 through 1996–97, also led to significant findings, as demonstrated in Figures 3 through 5..

Minority students were suspended at a much higher rate than their white counterparts. During 1995–96 the in-school suspension rate for white middle school students was 5.0 percent, whereas the rates for black and Hispanic middle school students was 14.4 percent and 6.8 percent respectively. Black middle school students served out-of-school suspensions at an even higher rate of 20.0 percent, whereas the average for white students was 8.4 percent, and 9.8 percent for Hispanic students. At some schools, the rate of suspension for black students was even higher. For example, at Watson B. Duncan Middle School in Palm Beach Gardens, 105 (48.5 percent) out-of-school suspensions were served by black students during the 1995–96 school year. This figure is particularly alarming in comparison to the school's total enrollment of 193 (11.8 percent) black students during that same school year.

9 H. Mehan et al, *Constructing School Success: The Consequences of Untracking Low-Achieving Students*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996; J. McPartland et al, "Improving Climate and Achievement in a Troubled Urban High School Through the Talent Development Model," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, forthcoming.

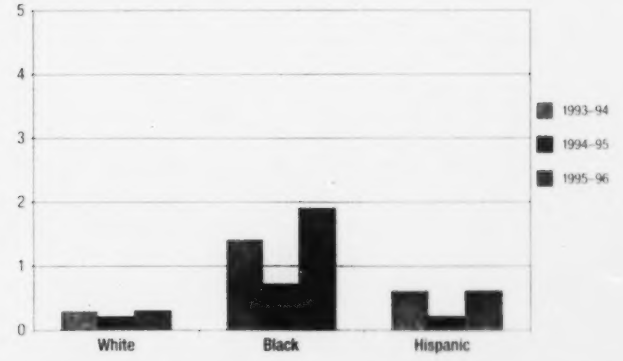

FIGURE 3 Average Out-of-School Suspensions Per School, Elementary Schools

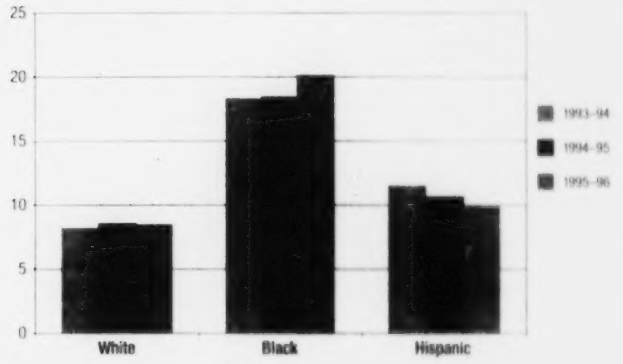

FIGURE 4 Average Out-of-School Suspensions Per School, Middle Schools

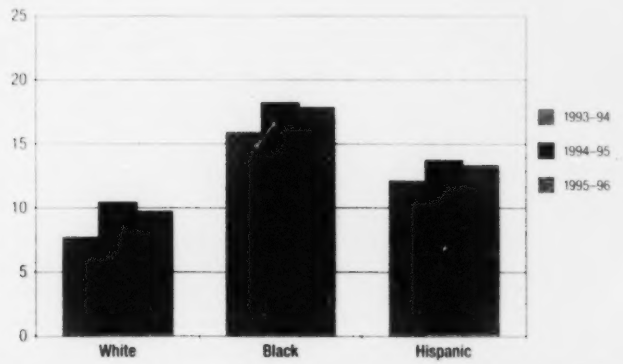

FIGURE 5 Average Out-of-School Suspensions Per School, High Schools

Suspension rates were even higher at the high school level. During 1995–96, the average in-school suspension rate for white students was 8.6 percent, as compared to 17.6 percent for black students and 12.9 percent for Hispanic students. Out-of-school suspensions were comparable, with an average of 9.7 percent reported for white students, 17.8 percent for black students and 13.3 percent for Hispanics. Out-of-school suspension rates varied among schools from a low of 0.7 percent at the School of the Arts, to a high of 27.7 percent at Santaluces High School. At Santaluces, the suspension rate for black students was 34.5 percent, compared to a total enrollment of 30.1 percent , and the suspension rate for Hispanic students was an even higher 35.2 percent, compared to a 14.6 percent enrollment rate. In contrast, white students comprised 53.4 percent of the total population at Santaluces, yet the suspension rate for white students was 22.3 percent.

The fact that Santaluces High School had such high suspension rates raises grave concerns about the climate at this school in particular. The 1996–97 School Improvement Plan approved by the School Advisory Council set forth recommendations for improvement in specific problem areas. The plan pointed out that the school's population had changed over the prior five-year period from 75 percent white to 53 percent white, 31 percent black, 15 percent Hispanic, and 1 percent Asian. In addition, the creators of the School Improvement Plan noted that 17 percent of the school's total population participates in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program, and 12 percent of the total population participates in special education. They also reported that 86 percent of the teachers were white; 11 percent black; 2 percent Hispanic, and 0.7 percent Asian. These numbers remained virtually unchanged from prior years.

The School Improvement Plan addressed the need to decrease suspension rates by recommending several strategies, including an alternative to the suspension program, a conflict mediation program, and use of the district's alternative to suspension program. Although these approaches can be useful

strategies, they clearly have all the limitations of "add-on" programs that can serve as temporary solutions to a problem that requires more focused attention. Suspension rates as high as those at Santaluces suggest not only that individual students may need support services but also that deeper issues relating to the school culture and relationships—both between adults and students and among students—need attention. For example, schools with a changing racial composition are predictably vulnerable to miscommunication between teachers and students and benefit from efforts to diversify staff to match changing enrollments. However, the Santaluces School Improvement Plan was silent about the need to increase the number of minority teachers and administrators at the school.

Overall, in-school and out-of-school suspension rates for minority students have remained relatively high over the past three years. But whether the numbers are small or large, school suspension is a crisis for the students involved. Any suspension results in students losing time from academic work. Suspension also suggests that schools are not effectively helping students learn the life skills needed to respond to situations that are frustrating or provocative, and negotiate and resolve differences. Well staffed "add-on" programs that teach peer mediation and conflict resolution can prevent students' losing time from learning and can teach important life skills. In addition, professional development for teachers can sharpen teachers' skills at communicating with all students.

However, when suspension rates are persistently high, they signal that deeper school norms may be working against the best interests of students. For example, high suspension rates often exist side-by-side with the disproportionate placement of minority students in lower-track classes—practices that together contribute to a culture of low expectations. Indeed, experts have commented that teachers and students in lower track classes tend to spend more time dealing with classroom management and disciplinary issues and less on the development of critical thinking and higher order skills.[10] In such settings, students become "curriculum casualties" who may fail to see any reason to engage in learning. Students who are "push outs" are thus placed at risk of dropping out of school altogether as they conclude that "school is not for me".[11]

When schools resort to suspension to resolve conflict and inappropriate behavior and also place many students in low-track classrooms, the school culture is likely to be grounded in low expectations and norms of exclusion that produce little learning. The response to such school must be intensive technical assistance for whole-school "reculturing" and restructuring.

Critically Low-Performing Schools

In 1995, the Florida Department of Education and the school districts began identifying critically low-performing schools across the state. Schools were placed on the critically low-performing list if they performed below the state minimum on the CTBS and Florida Writes! Tests for two consecutive years. During the 1996–97 school year, six schools in Palm Beach County were placed on the Critically Low-Performing School List: Rosenwald Elementary; Belle Glade Elementary; KEC/Canal Point Elementary; Barton Elementary; West Gate Elementary; and Pioneer Park Elementary. Four out of the six schools on the list are located in the Glades area. At least 80 percent of the student population at each of the six schools listed was black and Hispanic. Over 3,800 students were enrolled in these Critically Low-Performing Schools.

In addition to the schools placed on the Critically Low-Performing School list, in October 1997 the district identified 11 elementary schools, one middle school, and six high schools as "almost critically low-performing": Gladeview, Rolling Green, Lincoln, West Riviera, Northmore, Washington, Pine Grove, Lake Park, Northboro, Belvedere, and Pahokee Elementary; Lake Shore Middle School;

10. Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

11. G.A. Wehlage and R.A. Rutter, "Dropping Out: How Much Do Schools Contribute to the Problem?" *Teachers College Record*, Spring 1986; L.G. Felice, "Black Student Dropout Behavior: Disengagement from School, Rejection, and Racial Discrimination," *Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 50, 1981.

Glades Central, Forest Hill, Palm Beach Lakes, Palm Beach Gardens, Pahokee, and Lake Worth High School. At least 74.5 percent of the students at the elementary schools listed are minorities. At Lake Shore Middle School, 97.5 percent of the student population is black or Hispanic. Among the "almost critically low-performing" high schools, only Palm Beach Gardens High and Lake Worth High have less than a 60 percent minority student population.

Over 8,500 elementary school students, 1,400 middle school students, and over 11,700 high school students were served by these low-performing schools. In sum, over 25,000 of the Palm Beach County School District's students attend schools with significantly low performance records.

Schools have responded to these listings in a variety of ways. For example, Lincoln Elementary (on the list since 1995) was converted into a magnet school during the 1996–97 school year. They reported the implementation of several strategies to improve student performance: cooperative learning, inclusion, and homogeneous and multi-level grouping have been implemented this year. At KEC/Canal Point Elementary (initially placed on the list in 1995), strategies emphasized include: alternative assessment; block scheduling, heterogeneous grouping, inclusion, and test taking skills. And at Glades Central High School, alternative assessment, block scheduling, cooperative learning, homogeneous grouping, inclusion, test taking skills, mathematics hands-on instruction, and writing across the curriculum are being implemented.

Such proposed strategies are encouraging signs of change for students attending these schools. When implemented well, the practices proposed can produce higher achievement. For example, block scheduling can reorganize school time to allow for in-depth projects; cooperative learning has demonstrable effects on achievement, student motivation, and persistence; more writing assignments, especially when accompanied by direct teacher feedback, rubrics, and opportunities for revision can help students produce better writing; and more inclusive grouping strategies, when attached to a grade-level curriculum, can expand access to valued knowledge to all students.

However, experienced educators and researchers involved in school change caution against investing all hopes for improvement in "technical" solutions. Notably, researchers increasingly note that changes in school culture, including teacher beliefs and assumptions about students' capacity to learn well, must accompany new teaching strategies.[12]

School plans are likely to lead to change only when their proposed changes are linked to an implementation strategy. Almost all the changes proposed require extensive site-based professional development if they are to be executed well and for the benefit of students. For example, cooperative learning is most effective when teachers learn new classroom organization strategies, understand the learning theory that supports new grouping practices, and connect new practices to a challenging grade-level curriculum. Further, student success in a grade-level curriculum after years of working on materials pitched to younger students requires reorganizing the whole school in such a way as to ensure extra help early and often for students who need it. Finally, educators and researchers increasingly recognize that school reform requires on-going support from an outside technical assistance provider or facilitator.[13] In short, school plans should demand more than simple lists of new strategies. They should also describe realistic and detailed steps the school will take over time to ensure that these strategies will "stick." The absence of such detail should warn parents and citizens that promises implied in the plans may not be realized.

12. J. Oakes, "Can Tracking Research Inform Practice? Technical, Normative, and Political Considerations," *Educational Researcher*, May 1992; L. Lynn and A. Wheelock, "Developing a Culture of High Expectations for Teaching and Learning," *Harvard Education Letter*, January/February 1997; S.B. Sarason, *Revisiting The Culture of School and the Problem of Change*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1996.

13. L. Smith et al, "The Memphis Restructuring Initiative: Analysis of Activities and Outcomes that Impact Implementation Success," Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, April 1998, San Diego, California, To be published in Education in Urban Society.)

Dropout Rates

By law, all children living in the state of Florida between the ages of 6 and 16 years of age are required to attend school. The Palm Beach County School district defines dropouts as students age sixteen or older, in grades 9–12, who withdraw from school during the school year for legally specified reasons and fail to enroll in another educational institution or program before the end of the school year.

During the 1995–96 school year, the Palm Beach County School District's high school student dropout rate fell below the State's average of 4.1 percent for the first time in several years. Although the district's dropout rate averaged 4.0 percent for the 1996–97 school year, there were significant differences in the dropout rates at individual high schools. Table 2 illustrates the differences in dropout rates among Palm Beach County's high schools throughout the past five school years.

TABLE 2 Dropout Rates 1992–97

	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97
A.W.Dreyfoos School of the Arts	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.0
Atlantic	4.5	5.6	4.6	3.3	4.5
Boca Raton	5.3	5.7	4.5	5.3	4.4
Forest Hill	14.2	17.0	7.1	5.1	11.6
Glades Central	8.1	6.7	8.8	5.1	5.6
John I. Leonard	9.0	6.9	7.9	2.7	6.9
Jupiter	4.8	4.1	2.8	2.2	2.0
Lake Worth	5.4	8.1	6.2	6.2	6.2
Olympic Heights	2.0	2.3	4.6	2.1	2.2
Pahokee	1.8	2.8	4.5	2.8	2.3
Palm B. Gardens	3.7	6.8	6.7	3.8	2.4
Palm B. Lakes	2.9	4.7	3.3	3.4	3.8
Santaluces	1.8	6.4	4.4	4.6	4.9
Spanish River	4.0	5.4	6.2	3.1	2.7
Suncoast	0.5	0.2	0.4	<0.1	0.1
Wellington	4.5	3.9	3.2	4.1	2.7
William T. Dwyer	1.8	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.3
District	**4.6**	**5.4**	**4.7**	**3.5**	**4.0**
State	**4.1**	**4.8**	**4.3**	**4.1**	**4.3**

Source: Palm Beach County School District

Data show that the dropout rate for the 1996–97 school year was above state average in seven of the District's 17 high schools. At Forest Hill High the dropout rate was almost three times the district's rate.

Dropout rates also vary among white, black, and Hispanic students. During the 1996–97 school year, the district average for white students was 3.0 percent, whereas black students dropped out at a rate of 4.5 percent and Hispanic students dropped out at an even higher rate of 7.5 percent. Figure 6 demonstrates these dropout rates by race.

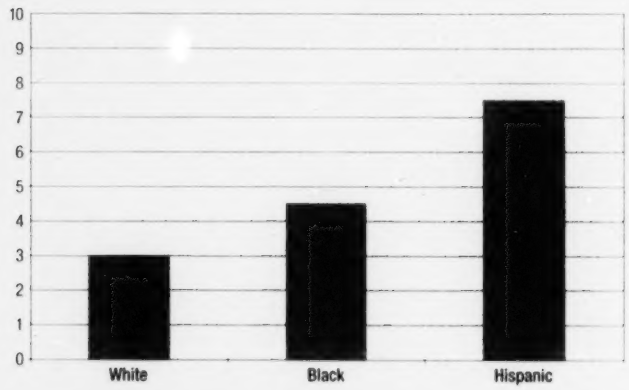

FIGURE 1 Percentage of Students Who Dropped Out of School, 1996–97

Graduation Rates

A district's graduation rate is legally defined as the percentage of first-time ninth graders who four years later leave school with a diploma, certificate of completion, or GED. The district's overall graduation rate was lower than the state average. Items such as the policy of promotion at ninth grade level, the availability of adult post-secondary programs, and district enrollment have an impact on graduation rates. Table 3 provides the graduation rates for the past five school years as reported by the Palm Beach County School District:

It is important to note that although these numbers represent official data as presented by the district, changes in collection and reporting procedures may have affected the outcome of the data. Nonetheless, the graduation rate dropped by almost 12 percent between 1993 and 1997.

TABLE 3 Graduation Rates 1992–97

	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97
District	80.0	79.5	66.2	74.9	67.2
State	78.7	75.6	72.9	73.2	73.2

Source: Palm Beach County School District

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School-by-School Comparisons: Barriers Encountered by Minority Students

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Elementary Schools

In order to gain a greater understanding of the disparities in outcomes in Palm Beach County's public schools, a few schools were examined more closely, beginning with a closer look at outcomes for three elementary schools: Limestone Creek Elementary, a school located in a predominantly white, middle- and upper-middle-class area of Jupiter; Gladeview Elementary, a predominantly African American school located in the western area of the county; and West Gate Elementary, a racially balanced school located in an ethnically diverse area of West Palm Beach.

At Limestone Creek Elementary, there were 970 students enrolled during the 1996–97 school year. The school has capacity for 723 students. There were six portables located on campus. Only 11.8 percent of the students at this school participated in the free or reduced-price lunch program. Last year, 89 percent of the students at this school were white; 8.0 percent were black; and 1.8 percent were Hispanic. The average class size was 28.2 students, and teachers had an average of 12.5 years experience. The regular-per pupil expenditure was $3,491. The total school budget for 1996–97 was $3,216,490. Of the fourth grade students at Limestone Creek Elementary, 83 percent scored above the national median in the reading portion of the CTBS exam. In the same grade, 88 percent of the students scored above the national median on the math portion of the CTBS exam.

At Gladeview Elementary, there were 678 students enrolled in a school that had a capacity for 599 students. There were 17 portables, and 85.5 percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Less than 1 percent of the total student population was white; 91.4 percent were black; and 7.7 percent were Hispanic. Teachers had an average of 11.5 percent years of experience, and the average class size was 22.8 students.

The regular per pupil expenditure was $4,413. The school budget was $3,201,263.12. Less than 6 percent of the fourth grade students at Gladeview Elementary scored above the national median on the reading portion of the CTBS and only 33 percent scored above the national median on the math portion.

At West Gate Elementary, there were 748 students in a school that has an official capacity of 381 students. There were 25 portables. Over 30 percent of the total student population was eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; 40 percent of the total student population was white; 30.9 percent was black; and 25.9 percent was Hispanic. The average class size was 23.2 students and teachers had an average of 11.5 years experience. The regular per-pupil expenditure was $4,395. The total school budget was $2,949,319.69. During 1996–97 only 19 percent of fourth grade students at West Gate elementary scored above the national median on the reading portion of the CTBS. Only 20 percent of fourth grade students scored above the national median in the mathematics portion of the CTBS.

The demographics of the student population have remained relatively consistent over the past three years at Limestone Creek Elementary and Gladeview Elementary. However, West Gate Elementary has seen an increase in the number of Hispanic students attending the school. During the 1993–94 school year, only 17.7 percent of the students at West Gate were Hispanic; by the 1996–97 school year, this number had increased to over 25 percent.

One of the benchmarks for measuring achievement at the elementary school level has been the use of the CTBS norm-referenced achievement test. The test, administered to fourth graders across the district compares their overall performance in reading and math as compared to other students taking the same exam across the nation. During the 1996–97 school year, 68 percent of fourth grade white students in Palm Beach County scored above the national median on the reading portion of the CTBS. Only 23 percent of black students and 36 percent of Hispanic students scored above the median. On the math portion of the CTBS, 79 percent of fourth grade white students scored above the national median. Only 38 percent of black students and 53 percent of Hispanic students scored above the median. Performance on the CTBS exam has remained consistently low at West Gate and Gladeview, while scores at Limestone have remained among the highest in the county (see Table 4).

TABLE 4 Percentage of Elementary School Students Testing Above the National Median on the CTBS Exam

		1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97
Limestone Creek Elementary	Reading:	74	81	83	83
	Math:	78	88	93	88
Gladeview Elementary	Reading:	5	7	13	6
	Math:	20	19	26	33
West Gate Elementary	Reading	32	16	20	19
	Math:	43	34	29	20

Source: Florida Department of Education

The disparities in outcomes at these three schools are striking. Students at Limestone Creek Elementary have maintained consistently high scores throughout the past four years. Scores for students at Gladeview Elementary show a continuing pattern of low performance, whereas scores at West Gate Elementary continue to drop with each passing year. Figures 7 and 8 illustrate the outcomes by race during 1996–97 at each of the three schools. Scores for white students at Limestone Creek and West Gate where significantly higher than scores for black and Hispanic students. Gladeview did not report any scores for white students and only math scores for Hispanic students.

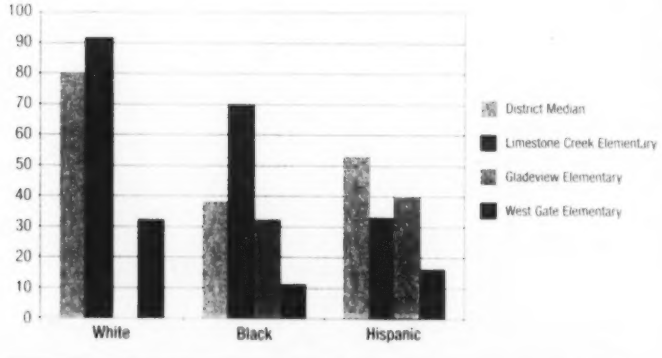


FIGURE 7 Norm-Referenced Achievement Test Performance—Grade 4: Percentage of Students Scoring Above the National Median in Math, 1996–97

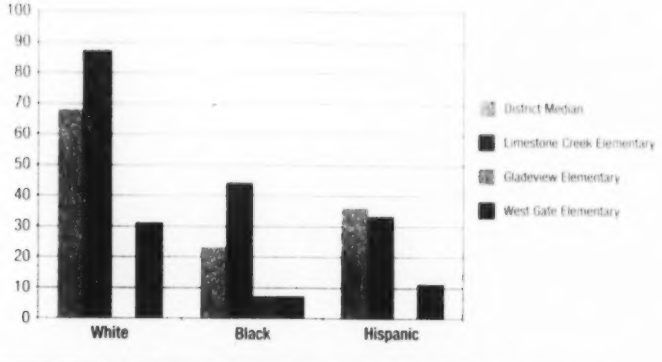
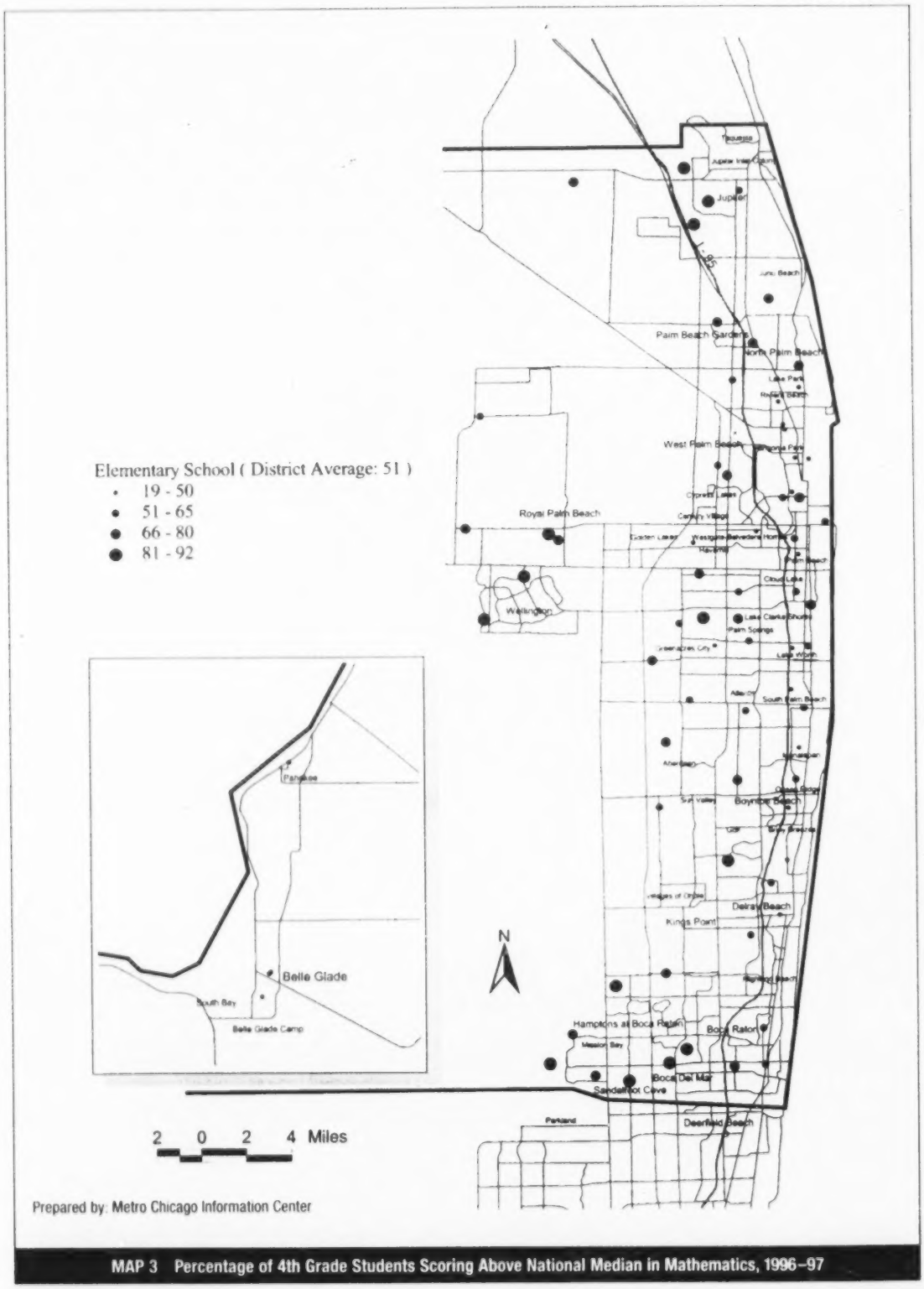


FIGURE 8 Norm-Referenced Achievement Test Performance—Grade 4: Percentage of Students Scoring Above the National Median in Reading, 1996–97

Perhaps one of the keys to success at Limestone Creek Elementary is parental involvement. According to documentation received from the district, there is a high level of parental involvement at Limestone Creek. This is demonstrated by the fact that several years ago, parents were prepared to launch a legal battle against the school board when it attempted to transfer the school's principal to a new magnet school. The School Improvement Plan also indicates the overall commitment to parental involvement. In contrast, the School Improvement Plans for Gladeview and West Gate Elementary indicate there is a dire need to increase parental involvement at both schools.

In addition to lower performance on test scores, the number of disciplinary incidents was much higher at Gladeview and West Gate than at Limestone Creek. During the years 1993–94 through 1996–97, West Gate had the highest in-school suspension rate among the three schools. Out-of-school suspensions were also lower for Limestone Creek during the same four-year period. The out-of-school suspension rate at Gladeview decreased from a total of 2.5 percent of students serving out-of-school suspensions during 1995–96 to 0.3 percent during 1996–97. At West Gate there was a slight increase from a total of 0.2 percent of students serving out-of-schools suspensions during 1995–96 to a total of 0.7 percent during 1996–97.



MAP 3 Percentage of 4th Grade Students Scoring Above National Median in Mathematics, 1996–97

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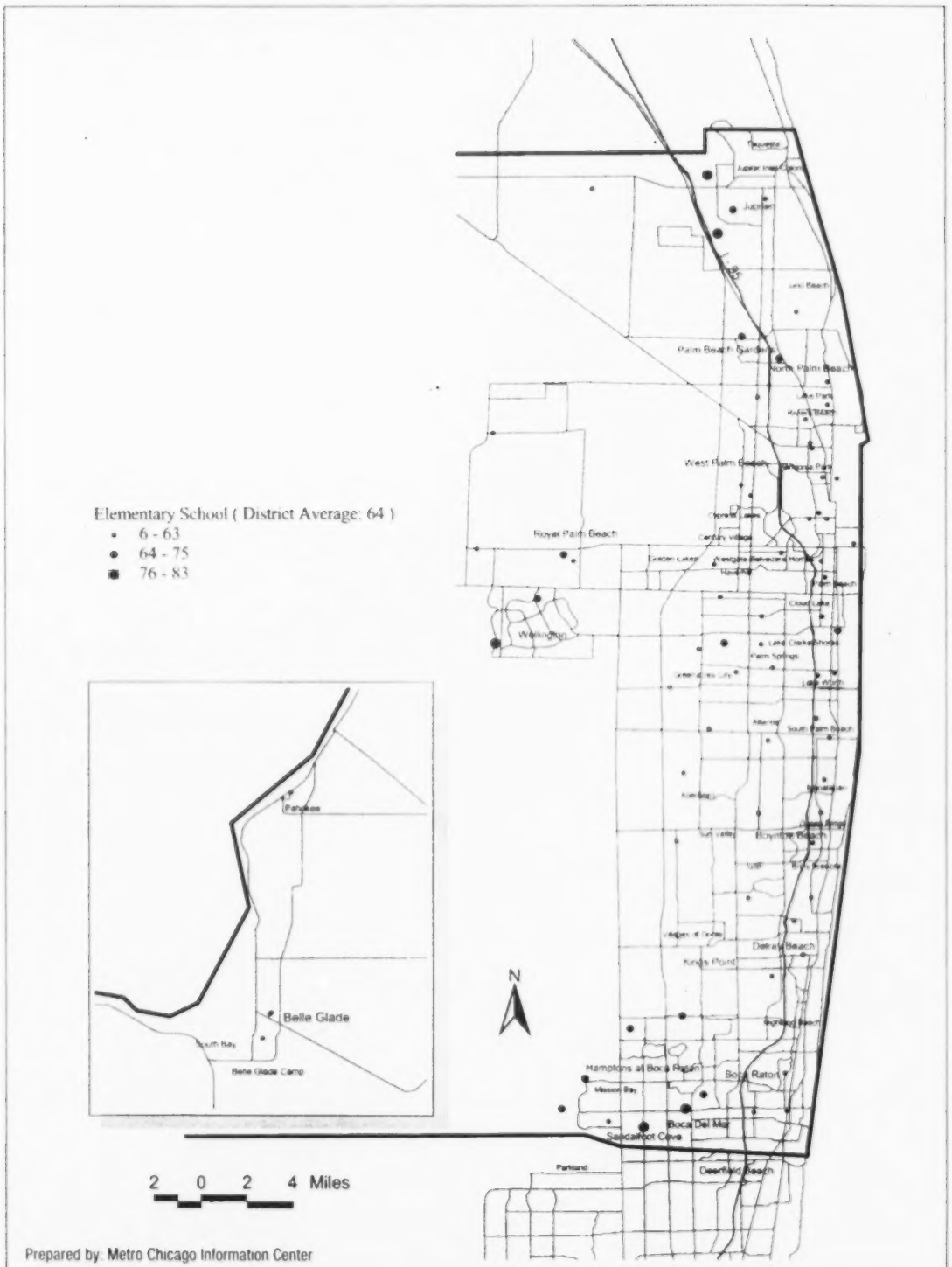

MAP 4 Percentage of 4th Grade Students Scoring Above National Median in Reading, 1996–97

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Middle Schools

Children who graduate from these three elementary schools move on to different middle schools where the patterns of inequity are perpetuated. Children who attend Limestone Creek Elementary are generally assigned to Jupiter Middle School. According to the district's data, 86 percent of students at Jupiter Middle are white; 8.9 percent are black; and 3.6 percent are Hispanic. Only 21.5 percent of students are on free and reduced-price lunch. There are 1,384 students enrolled, and the school has a capacity for 1,300. The school has 16 portables.

Students at Gladeview Elementary are usually assigned to Lake Shore Middle School in Belle Glade. 2.1 percent of students at Lake Shore are white; 72.6 percent are black; and 24.9 percent are Hispanic. Over 85 percent of the students at Lake Shore are on free or reduced-price lunch. There are a total of 1,490 students enrolled at Lake Shore, and the school has a capacity for only 800 students. There are 18 portables at Lake Shore.

The majority of students at West Gate Elementary are assigned to Bear Lakes Middle School. During the 1996–97 school year, 39.6 percent of the students at Bear Lakes were white; 44 percent were black; and 13 percent were Hispanic. Over 66 percent of the students were on free or reduced-price lunch. There were 1,486 students enrolled at Bear Lakes. According to the district, the school has a capacity for 1,201 students. There are 33 portables at this school.

Norm-referenced test scores also varied significantly among these three schools. These variations appear to be a reflection of districtwide outcomes. For example, during the 1996–97 school year, 79 percent of white eighth grade students in the Palm Beach County School District scored above the national median on the reading portion of the CTBS. In contrast, only 35 percent of black students and 52 percent of Hispanic students scored above the median. Similar results were reached on the math portion of the CTBS exam, where 76 percent of white students scored above the national median. However, only 30 percent of black students and 48 percent of Hispanic students scored above the national median. At the three middle schools, overall performance on the CTBS exam broke down as shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5 Percentage of Middle-School Students Testing Above the National Median on the CTBS Exam

		1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97
Jupiter Middle School	Reading:	72	86	83	83
	Math:	65	79	78	79
Bear Lakes Middle School	Reading:	49	56	56	58
	Math:	47	51	50	51
Lake Shore Middle School	Reading	13	32	39	29
	Math:	36	31	31	29

Source: Florida Department of Education

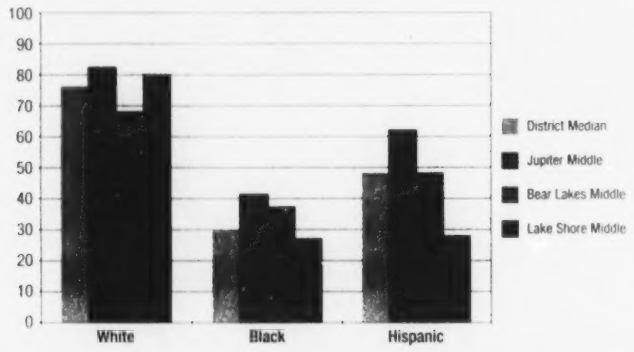


FIGURE 9 Norm-Referenced Achievement Test Performance—Grade 8: Percentage of Students Scoring Above the National Median in Math, 1996–97

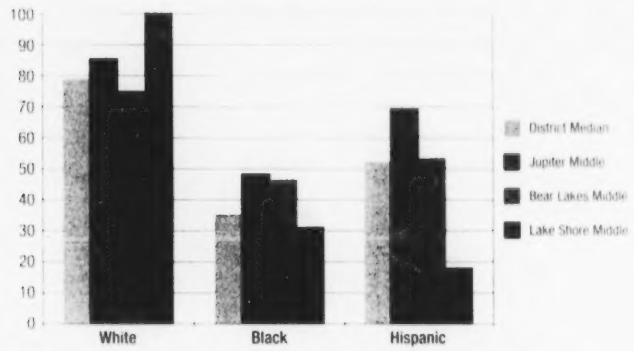


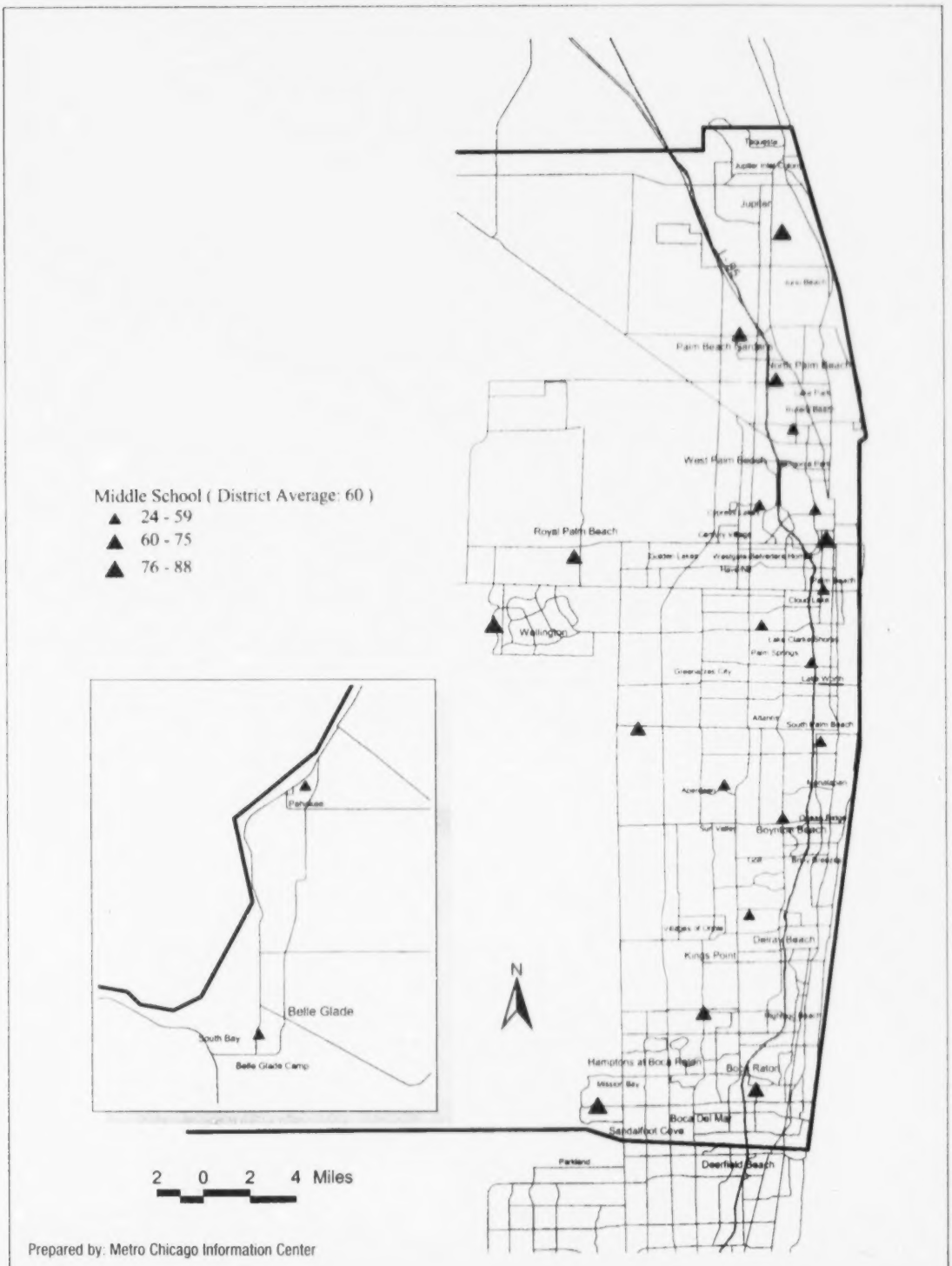
FIGURE 10 Norm-Referenced Achievement Test Performance—Grade 8: Percentage of Students Scoring Above the National Median in Reading, 1996–97

These middle school scores are comparable to the scores achieved by the three feeder elementary schools. Although the overall middle school CTBS scores are low, there are also significant differences when these scores are broken down by race at each of these school sites. Figures 9 and 10 describe the breakdown of CTBS scores at the three schools by race as compared to the district average for 1996–97.

Although suspension data for 1996–97 were not available by race, it was possible to examine overall suspension rates for these three schools. The district average percentage of students serving in-school suspensions was 8.6 percent. At Jupiter middle it was 2.3 percent; at Lake Shore Middle it was 6.8 percent and at Bear Lakes Middle it was 16.9 percent.

Out-of-school suspension data showed similar patterns. Although 14.5 percent of middle school students in the district served out-of-school suspensions, the number at Jupiter High was lower than the district average with only 12.8 percent of its students being suspended out of school. However, Bear Lakes and Lake Shore Middle had the highest averages in the district, as 22.7 percent of students at Bear Lakes were suspended during 1996–97, and 26.4 percent of students at Lake Shore Middle served out-of-school suspensions.

PHOTO © THE PALM BEACH POST/ ALLEN EYESTONE



MAP 5 Percentage of 8th Grade Students Scoring Above the National Median in Mathematics, 1996–97

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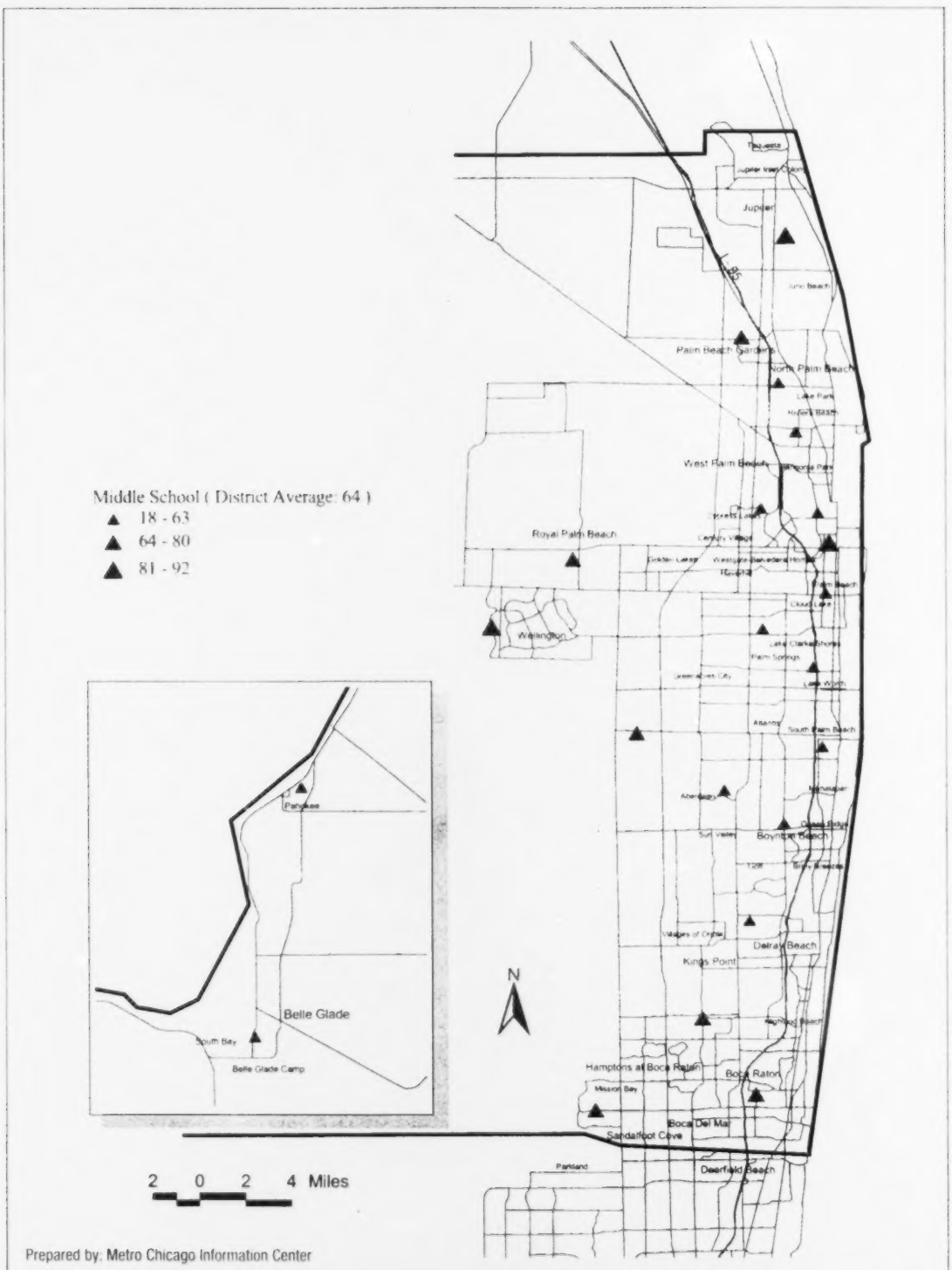

MAP 6 Percentage of 8th Grade Students Scoring Above the National Median in Reading, 1996–97

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High Schools

The racial disparities in outcomes follow students to the high school level, as becomes evident by following the performance of students at three high schools that receive students from these middle schools. Students from Jupiter Middle School are usually assigned to Jupiter High School. Students who attend Bear Lakes Middle School are usually assigned to Palm Beach Lakes High School, and students from Lakeshore Middle School are assigned to Glades Central High School.

During 1996–97, there were 1,611 students enrolled at Jupiter High School. The school has a capacity for 2,772 students. There are no portables at the school. Only 9.6 percent of students were identified as eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. At Jupiter High, 89.9 percent of students were white; 4.6 percent were black; and 4.0 percent were Hispanic.

At Glades Central High School, there were 1,436 students enrolled during the 1996–97 school year. The school has an official capacity of 1,514 students. There are two portables. The student population was 2.6 percent white; 77.6 percent black; and 19.7 percent Hispanic. Approximately 80 percent of the students were identified as eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

At Palm Beach Lakes High School, there were 2,659 students enrolled during the 1996–97 school year. The school has an official capacity of 2,596 students. There are no portables. At this school, 31.4 percent of students were white; 54.5 percent were black; and 12.0 percent were Hispanic. Over 40 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Students who wish to graduate from high school with a standard high school diploma are required to pass the High School Competency Test (HSCT) in the 11th grade. The percentage of 11th grade students who took the HSCT varied among the three high schools. At Jupiter High, 98 percent of students in the 11th grade took the HSCT during the fall of 1996. At Palm Beach Lakes High, only 83 percent of eleventh graders took the HSCT, whereas at Glades Central High there was an 88 percent participation rate. The percentage of students who actually passed the exam also varied (Table 6).

Lower testing participation rates at Palm Beach Lakes and Glades Central High Schools are part of a larger picture of student disconnection as evidenced by higher than average attendance rates at those schools. For example, during the 1996–97 year, some 18 percent of all Palm Beach County high school students were absent from school 21 days or more. However, at Palm Beach Lakes, this absentee rate was 20.4 percent; and at Glades Central, the absentee rate was a disturbing 29.0 percent.

As at the middle school level, scores were consistently lower for black and Hispanic students than for white students. Figures 11 and 12 illustrate these disparities.

TABLE 6 Percentage of Students Passing the HSCT

		1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97
Jupiter High School	Communications:	95	95	93	86
	Math:	82	90	88	82
Glades Central High School	Communications:	80	69	69	52
	Math:	68	62	51	62
Palm Beach Lakes High School	Communications:	89	86	84	75
	Math:	75	78	70	68

Source: Florida Department of Education

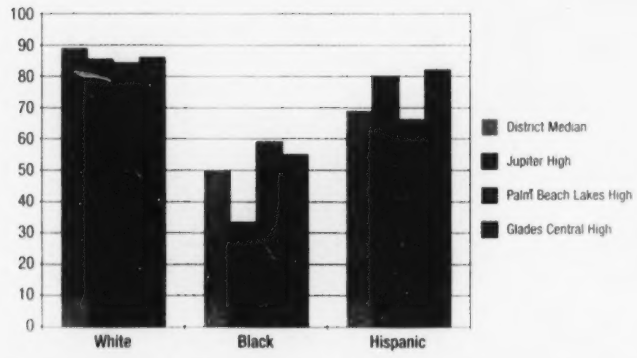


FIGURE 11 Percentage of Students Passing High School Competency Test (HSCT), Math, Grade 11, 1996–97

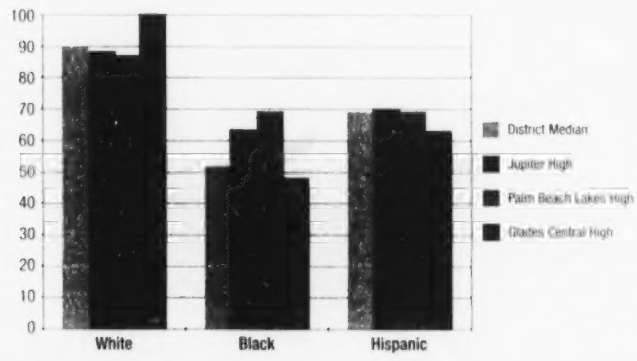
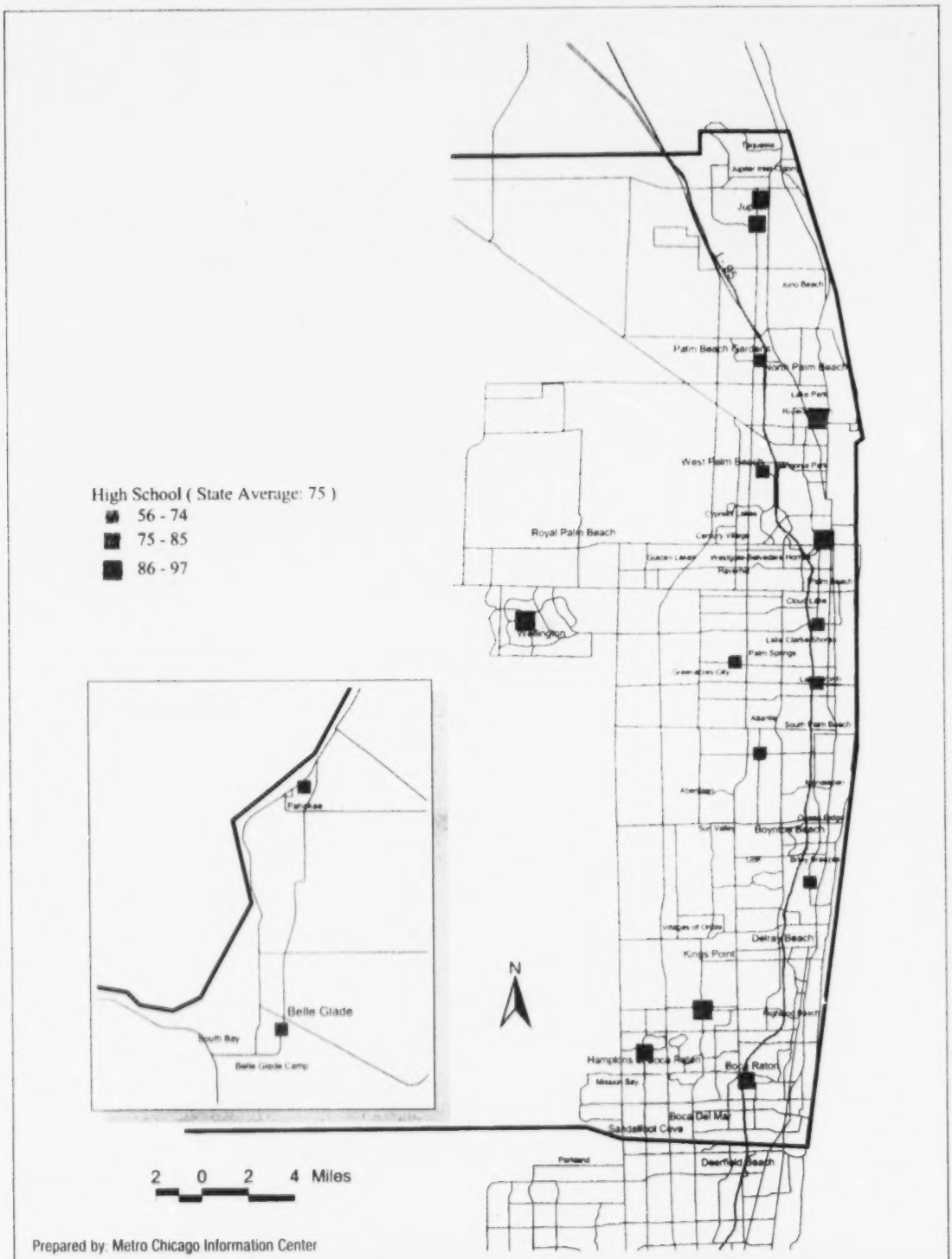


FIGURE 12 Percentage of Students Passing High School Competency Test (HSCT), Communications, Grade 11, 1996–97

At the high school level, data available allowed for an examination of tracking in order to determine the existence of any racially identifiable patterns of enrollment in upper-level classes. These patterns were most obvious at Palm Beach Lakes High School, also the most integrated of the three high schools, where there were 834 (31.4 percent) white students, 1,448 (54.5 percent) black students and 318 (12.0 percent) Hispanic students enrolled during the 1996–97 school year. In November of 1996, there were 114 students enrolled in the Math III Plus (Advanced Math) class. Of the 114 students, 62 (54.4 percent) were white; 33 (28.9 percent) were black; and 13 (11.4 percent) were Hispanic. Likewise, in the Science III Plus class, there were 288 students enrolled. Of these, 152 (52.8 percent) students were white; 93 (32.3 percent) were black; and 31 (10.8 percent) were Hispanic.

These data should alarm anyone who believes that schools should help all students learn the skills and content they will need to know to become productive workers and citizens in the 21st century. Even our cursory analysis of these data shows that shockingly few students in the school overall are enrolled in a math and science course sequence that will allow them entry into a meaningful post-secondary program in mathematics or the sciences. Such low enrollments in classrooms where students can learn valued knowledge signals a school climate characterized by low expectations for all students' learning capacities and futures. Moreover, access to challenging learning opportunities seems especially narrow for black students in particular, who are enrolled in upper-level courses at a rate that is only about half that of their enrollment rate in the school.



MAP 7 Percentage of Students Passing HSCT Mathematics, 1996–97

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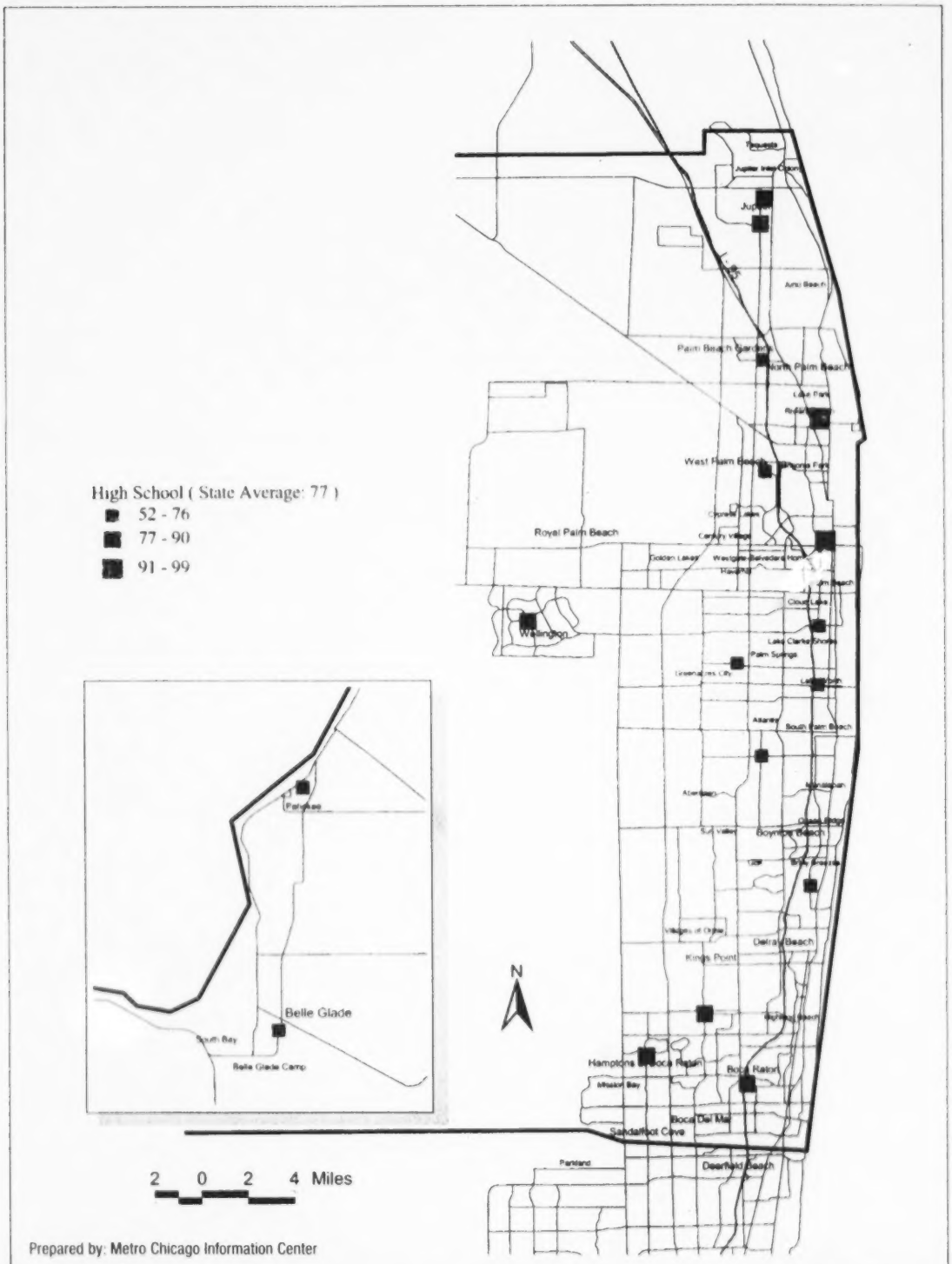

MAP 8 Percentage of Students Passing HSCT Communications, 1996–97

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Unfortunately, the 1996–97 school report data available from the Florida Department of Education did not breakdown suspension data by race. Nonetheless, we found that for 1996–97 the district average for in-school suspensions at the high school level was 12.1 percent. We found that the highest percentage of suspensions occurred at Palm Beach Lakes High, where an average of 25.7 percent of students served in-school suspensions. At Jupiter High, the average was 13.8 percent. The lowest number of in-school suspensions occurred at Glades Central High, where 8.8 percent of students were suspended. However, out-of-school suspension data were quite different. The district had an average of 12.8 percent students who served out-of-school suspensions during 1996–97. At Jupiter High, only 8.7 percent of students received out-of-school suspensions. At Palm Beach Lakes High, 9.3 percent of students received out-of-school suspensions. Whereas at Glades Central High, an average of 19.7 percent of students were suspended out of school. These numbers suggest that while keeping a student out of school may be a last resort at schools such as Jupiter High, it appears to be the norm at Glades Central High.

The dropout rate at these three high schools also varied significantly. While the district reported a 4 percent dropout rate during 1996–97, Glades Central High had a dropout rate of 5.6 percent. The dropout rate for Palm Beach Lakes High was 3.8 percent and at Jupiter High it was only 2 percent. According to the Florida School Indicators Report for 1996–97, 64 percent of the graduates from Jupiter High indicated they would be continuing their education. In contrast, only 36 percent of the students at Glades Central High and 42 percent of graduates from Palm Beach Lakes High reported an intent to pursue a higher education.

To follow students' travels from elementary school to secondary school is to see that, depending on the starting point, different students follow different roads to different end points almost by design. Positioned at different starting points when they begin the journey, students and parents may not anticipate the hurdles they will encounter as they make their way from grade to grade. However, once the journey is completed, it becomes clear that the roads they traveled pre-determined their final destination. As the school comparisons and their feeding patterns demonstrate, if students are to experience equal educational opportunity in Palm Beach County schools, every school, but particularly those that enroll a majority of black, Hispanic, and poor students, will have to repave their roads to learning and remove the barriers that hinder student engagement and success.

Conclusion

The data clearly indicate that in Palm Beach County, students from a predominantly white school are less likely to be suspended out of school, more likely to obtain higher standardized test scores, and almost twice as likely to pursue a higher education than students from schools that have a higher percentage of minority enrollment. Predominantly white schools demonstrate "holding power"—the capacity to engage students so that all students invest in their schooling.

In contrast, many minority students begin their schooling in racially isolated schools where they experience academic failure early and often. Then, continuing in racially identifiable middle and high schools, they increasingly experience a variety of low-expectations practices that move them to the fringes of learning—whether through school placement in low-challenge courses or through school suspensions. Little by little, many leave school with neither the skills or social network that offer them real chances for future success in work, parenting, and citizenship.

Properly implemented, the school reform movement provides a chance for parents and citizens to become engaged in improving the education of Palm Beach County's children. The future of Palm Beach County and the futures of today's students are being shaped in our schools today, and every day. The economic success of the county rests in the hands of its future workforce just as the social health of the community depends on a well-educated citizenry. Parents, educators, and citizens of the county all share the responsibility for ensuring that all children, regardless of race or socio-economic status, are provided the skills necessary to survive and prosper as adult members of the workforce, as future parents, and as citizens, thus ensuring a new generation of families a satisfactory quality of life.

Recommendations

As this report makes clear, dramatic inequities in opportunities to learn are institutionalized in many routine practices in Palm Beach County Schools. These inequities contribute to low achievement, student disengagement, and high dropout rates. Addressing these inequities requires a multi-faceted strategy that reshapes districtwide approaches to school organization and parent involvement and also directs focused attention and resources to those schools that most need reform if they are to effectively educate poor, black, and Hispanic students. Implementing such a strategy must begin with a commitment to guiding principles.

Guiding Principles

Educational decision-making to remedy unequal educational opportunities and establish excellent schools for all students must reflect the following principles:

- Every single student is entitled to equal access to high-quality classrooms in high-quality schools characterized by high teacher expectations, nurturing relationships that honor students' diverse cultural traditions, challenging content that forms a foundation for on-going learning, and extra help for learning provided in a supportive climate;
- School reform requires both whole-school change and reform of routine practices along with additional resources directed to low-performing schools with large numbers of students who need additional support to succeed;
- Every single student can benefit from educational opportunities that develop higher-order thinking, reasoning, and communications skills in all content areas through high-quality curriculum and teaching that includes in-depth access to knowledge, active learning to produce work for real world audiences, Socratic discussion, field trips, computer and library access, and extra-curricular activities;

- Every single student must receive the support necessary to succeed in high-expectations classrooms, including extra support for those students most at risk of falling behind grade-level expectations;
- Parents and citizens need information, made available in home languages, about school performance. This information should be provided in understandable form for reflection, discussion, and action, including information disaggregated by grade and by race for each school and for the district overall;
- Meaningful reform for equity and excellence is a challenging endeavor, requiring long-term, sustained support, resources, and outside facilitation and technical assistance at both the district and school level.

A. THE DISTRICT SHOULD:

1. Convene a broad-based group of educators, parents, students, human service workers, and community representatives responsible for developing a plan to address the inequities identified in this report. The district should identify an outside facilitator from the Southeast Desegregation Assistance Center, Florida Department of Education, or another independent organization to work with this group. The plan should be ready within six months and should set goals and establish a specific timetable to:
   - Reorganize Central Office to encourage planning for inclusion and high achievement by establishing internal task forces that promote collaboration among bilingual, Title 1, special education, and 'gifted" program staff with content area specialists;
   - Increase immediate access of minority students to gifted programs at levels commensurate with their enrollment in the district overall;
   - Make the learning opportunities, including curriculum, teaching strategies, enrichment activities, computer and library access, and field trips available in the gifted program the standard curriculum for every elementary school and, in the long run, integrate all students identified as 'gifted' into the mainstream by retraining teachers now working in separate classrooms to be resource teachers who co-teach with other teachers;
   - Improve achievement in low-performing schools at all levels by identifying appropriate strategies for whole-school change and extra-help programs and describing an implementation strategy for such change;
   - Assign a multi-cultural team to assist each low-performing school to engage in a study, planning, and implementation process focused on whole-school change to reform school climate, improve teaching and learning, and strengthen holding power through approaches such as (but not limited to):
     — In the elementary grades: The Accelerated Schools Program (from Stanford University); Roots and Wings (from the Johns Hopkins University); the Junior Great Books Program (from the Great Books Foundation).
     — In the middle grades: The Accelerated Schools Program; the Talent Development Middle School Model (from the Center for Students Placed at Risk of Howard and Johns Hopkins Universities); the Junior Great Books Program.
     — In the high school grades: The Talent Development High School Model; Schools That Work (from the Southern Regional Education Board); AVID (from San Diego County Schools); and Equity 2000 (from the College Board).
     — In appropriate K–12 feeder/receiving school "pathways": A two-way bilingual school model in which Spanish-speaking and English-speaking students learn grade-level curriculum in both languages.
   - Given College Board findings that success in high school geometry is highly correlated with post-secondary success, enroll all students in Algebra 1 (or an equivalent NCTM standards-based curriculum like the Connected Math Project (of Michigan State University) or the Integrated Mathematics Project (of San Francisco State University) by ninth grade at the latest; at the same time, increase enrollment of black and Hispanic students in every school in Math III and Science III, and provide assistance to both teachers and students to promote success in these classrooms;
   - Phase out low-level courses that have no demonstrated relationship to success in work or post-secondary education;

- Reduce suspensions at all high-suspension schools;
- Reduce the numbers of students absent more than 21 days, especially in low-performing schools;
- Increase the graduation rates in schools with high dropout rates;
- Identify strategies and resources to improve parent involvement. Appropriate steps include: making a full range of disaggregated information available to all parents; providing these same materials to language minority parents in the language of the home; creating opportunities for parents to gain leadership development skills; holding meetings at times convenient to parents and at community-based locations likely to enhance their comfort in participating; limiting the number of parent seats on advisory board/committees and school-based councils that are held by parents who are also school district employees to lessen the likelihood of conflict of interest; taking steps to ensure that the racial and ethnic makeup of school site councils reflects the racial and ethnic makeup of the student body of the school in question.
- Provide professional development designed to support principals as they guide low-performing schools through a reform process;
- Provide professional development and organizational development for teachers at the school-site level designed to address inequities in access to knowledge, low expectations, disproportionate suspensions, and attendance problems;
- Review teacher assignments and reshape both financial and professional incentives (including such strategies as offering mini-grants to teachers and establishing low-income schools as professional development schools) to promote stability of teachers at low-performing schools;
- Identify and enlist committed support from community-based organizations, including public and non-profit independent social services agencies, health clinics and hospitals, small businesses, and community development organizations, that will work with schools to support vulnerable students, help parents support their children, and pursue community development models to raise community expectations for student success and connect each school more closely with the needs of the community.

2. Assign staff from Central Office responsible for overseeing implementation of such a plan and making regular reports to the public and the planning group on the progress of implementation.
3. Disseminate information regarding student achievement and school data in the language of the home. School Report Cards (SPAR reports) should be distributed to parents in the mail and at regular school events. School staff should release report cards to the community in a forum that allows parents to ask questions of teachers, counselors, and administrators in their home language. Such report cards should also include samples of real student work that meet "excellent" and "satisfactory" standards along with the number of students who complete such work at different levels of quality. All data should be disaggregated by race, grade, special education status and LEP status. Schools should regularly share this data with mainstream and minority language media outlets.
4. Publicize and replicate school-based reforms that represent "best practices" in reducing disparities in achievement, access to knowledge, suspension, attendance, and dropout rates.
5. Review and renew all efforts to diversify the teaching staff in all schools, but especially in schools with high minority enrollments, to match the student enrollment in each school more closely.

B. IN ORDER TO ESTABLISH A HIGH-EXPECTATIONS CLIMATE FOR ALL STUDENTS, EVERY SCHOOL SHOULD:

1. Conduct a regular school assessment of existing conditions, practices, and policies that contribute to unequal access to knowledge, low student achievement, and student disengagement, review data related to school performance in faculty-wide discussion groups, and adopt research-based strategies for a) developing a school climate that honors students' diverse cultures and language and b) creates a culture for achievement.
2. Transform any existing programs for students labeled "gifted" into support for "gifted programming" for all students in heterogeneous classrooms.

3. Organize teacher study groups, with professional development and support from the principal and Central Office, to a) study, recommend, and implement school-based alternatives to ability grouping and tracking; b) identify and phase-in challenging curriculum for heterogeneous groups; c) describe and take steps to ensure a climate for high teacher expectations, high student motivation, and inclusion; and d) study, recommend, and implement school-based alternatives to suspension.
4. Review the school schedule, guidance procedures, and support structures to ensure that every single student has the necessary extra help to succeed in the grade-level mainstream.
5. Establish regular events and materials, executed in the language of the home, so that parents can view student academic work, establish a system of student-led conferences on student work, and develop programs involving public demonstration and review of students' work.

C. To address urgent problems of lack of access to valued knowledge, low achievement, and disengagement, every low-performing school should:

1. Engage in a faculty-wide review of whole-school reform models and select a model for implementation so that within three years a) every student has access to a challenging, grade-level curriculum in heterogeneous classrooms; b) every teacher is prepared to teach a challenging curriculum to heterogeneous classes; c) every student receives the extra help necessary for success in the grade-level curriculum; d) every student receives guidance support tailored to prepare him or her for success at the next level of school, or in the world of work, from counselors who demonstrate high expectations for all students, as well as competency working with families and students of different racial, cultural, and language groups.
2. Restructure large schools into small, semi-autonomous "academies" or schools-within-schools serving no more than 350 students, each with a distinct entrance, teacher-in-charge, guidance staff, and support services.
3. Improve teachers' capacity to personalize learning and strengthen relationships through such strategies such as multi-year teaming (looping) or assigning English and social studies teachers to teach an interdisciplinary humanities curriculum thereby reducing their student load.
4. Collaborate with community-based organizations to set up and sustain a teacher-support team linked to student-centered social services or school-based health clinics that focus on improving attendance and reducing behavioral problems and to a school-based parent center; develop ways in which the staff of community-based organizations can serve as a bridge between schools and the surrounding community so that school staff can develop greater understanding of students' cultural traditions.

D. To enforce the spirit and letter of education reform, the Florida Department of Education should:

1. Ensure that local parents and citizens can monitor all aspects of education reform by disaggregating all data by race, grade, and school and taking pro-active steps to ensure that the public knows that these data are easily accessible.
2. Establish high-quality technical assistance resources immediately available to Palm Beach County Schools to execute a planning and implementation process of reform for equity as outlined in these recommendations and assign a staff member to work as a responsible liaison between the Department and the district.
3. Prepare and widely circulate a set of "policy advisories" that will inform educators and parents in Palm Beach and throughout the state about research related to school suspensions, dropout patterns, and tracking, and highlight exemplary alternatives to these practices currently in operation in the state's multi-racial communities so that this district can learn from available examples.
4. Prepare to take on a stronger role in ensuring that every single student in Palm Beach County has equal access to high-quality schools in the event that after three years the conditions documented in this report have not changed; conduct research to identify districts throughout the country where state take-over of schools has been successful and the policies (such as national recruitment of new principals) and conditions under which success has occurred; disseminate these findings widely to build capacity within district offices to effect such take-overs themselves.

APPENDIX A: The Rights of Limited English Proficient Children

FLORIDA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE REQUIRED TO PROVIDE EQUAL ACCESS TO LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT CHILDREN

In *Plyler v. Doe*, the U.S. Supreme Court established that all children are entitled to receive a free, public education regardless of their immigration status. In the years following the Supreme Court's decision, it became apparent that there was no mechanism to ensure that children who did not speak English as a first language would receive comprehensible instruction. During the early 1990s a large group of community advocates, including parents and national organizations such as the NAACP and LULAC, filed a lawsuit against the State Board of Education. The lawsuit alleged that limited English proficient children were not receiving comprehensible instruction in public schools throughout the state of Florida. As a result of this lawsuit, the State Board of Education entered into a consent decree that requires all public schools in the state to provide certain safeguards designed to protect the rights of limited English proficient children. The following are some of the requirements of the consent decree in *LULAC et al. v. State Board of Education:*

a. All schools must provide all limited English proficient students access to comprehensible instruction.

b. All schools must provide limited English proficient students access to all programs offered by the school, regardless of their level of English language proficiency.

c. Every school that has 15 or more students who speak the same heritage language must provide a teacher or aide who speaks that language to assist in making instruction to these students understandable.

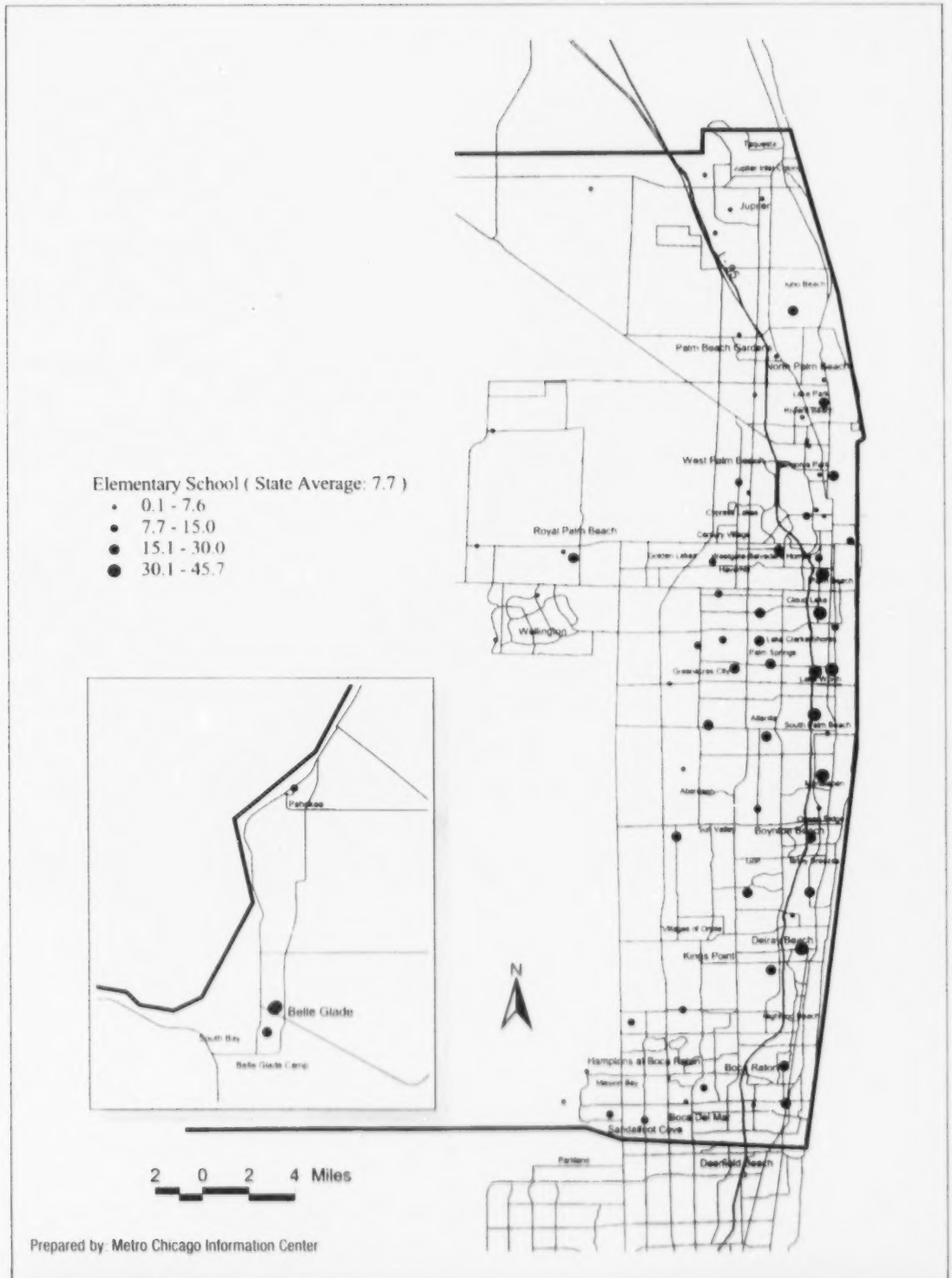
d. Every school must provide home-school communications in the limited English proficient students home language, when feasible.

e. Every school district must establish a LEP Parent Leadership Council to provide input into the District LEP plan and assist in implementing it.

f. Every parent that believes his or her child is not receiving comprehensible instruction as a result of a District's failure to comply with the consent decree, is entitled to file a complaint with the Florida Department of Education, Office for Multicultural Student Language Education.

A Florida parent who believes that his or her child is not receiving comprehensible instruction due to failure by the school to provide any of the above, may use a free Parent Help line at the Florida Department of Education, Office for Multicultural Student Language Education (OMSLE) to receive assistance. **1-800-206-8956.** OMSLE staff speak Spanish and Kreyol. A formal complaint may be filed by writing a simple letter (in any language) describing the problem and indicating the wish to formally complain to:

Office for Multicultural Student
Language Education
125 East Gaines Street
Suite 544
Tallahassee, FL 32399



MAP 9 Students in ESOL Programs (Elementary Schools), 1996–97

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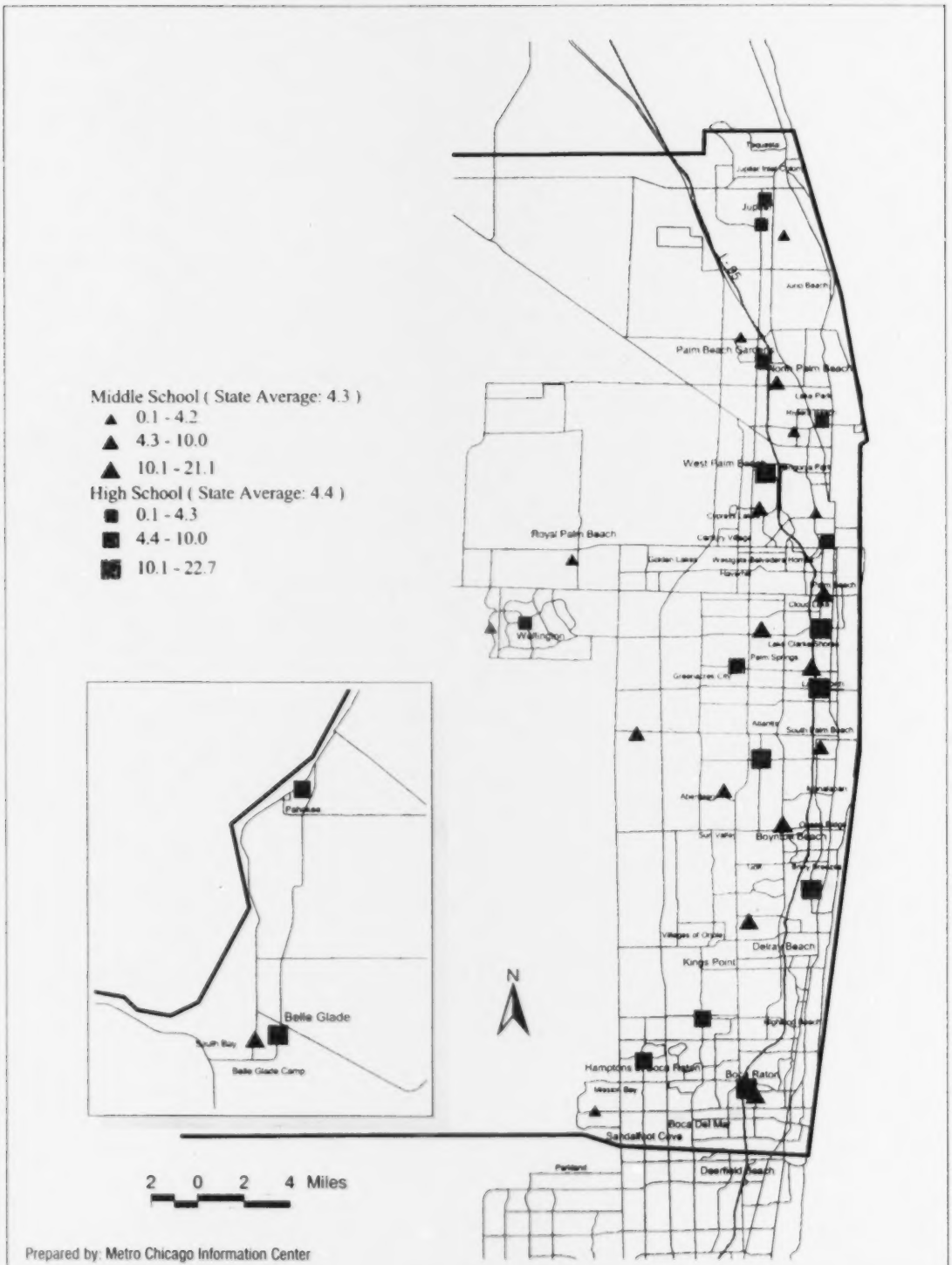

MAP 10 Students in ESOL Programs (Middle and High Schools), 1996–97

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APPENDIX B: The Palm Beach County School District's Budget

THE BUDGET

- During the 1997 fiscal year, the district's total budget (all funds) was $1.4 billion.
- The Capital Projects (school construction, repairs, remodeling) budget was $380.6 million or 27 percent of the total budget.
- The Operating Fund (salaries, supplies, textbooks) budget was $767.4 million or 54 percent of the total budget.

SOURCES OF REVENUE

- The district's funds come from three major sources: the state, the federal government and local contributions.
- During FY 1997 the federal government provided $977,000. This amounted to less than 1 percent of the Operating Funds budget. Other federal grants provided $51.9 million dollars to the district during FY 1997.
- The state accounted for $273.2 million or approximately 36 percent of the Operating Budget for FY 1997.
- Local sources provided $466.2 million or 61 percent of the revenue for the FY 1997 Operating Budget
- Lottery funds provided only $29.4 million or 3 percent of the Operating Budget during FY 1997.

HOW DOES THE STATE ALLOCATE FUNDS TO THE SCHOOL DISTRICTS?

Each year, the State Legislature determines a base student allocation for every child enrolled in Florida's public school system. This figure is adjusted on a district-by-district basis based on the district's "cost differential" (a computation that takes into account the district's price level index for the previous three years). Districts are required to report the total number of full-time students enrolled in school by the type of program attended. The funding levels vary among different types of programs. For example, a student who is enrolled in a basic first grade classroom and has no special needs will be funded at a different level than a first grade student enrolled in the gifted program or other type of exceptional student program. A weighted FTE is developed, and used as the basis for cost per student. State funding provided $186.5 million dollars to the district during the 1997 fiscal year.

NATIONAL COALITION OF ADVOCATES FOR STUDENTS
Boston, MA

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